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ABSTRACT

The degree and nature of parental involvement at three high schools was studied. A brief survey of school personnel gathered the responses of teachers about parental involvement, and teachers and staff were asked to nominate involved parents as well as parents who seemed to perceive barriers to school involvement. Following the surveys, 52 in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers, school administrators, staff, and involved and "uninvolved" parents. Parental involvement differed in degree and nature between schools and within schools. In this study, the greatest variance in parent involvement was found in the most rural of the schools studied. Findings did reveal that parents are involved in many ways, including the silent involvement of encouraging children's educational activities. A high level of parental involvement did not automatically mean positive school-community relations, since an angry and vocal parent body may be perceived as threatening by school administrators. Parental involvement is shaped by parent-school relations and by relations within the parent community. In one of the schools, a deeply felt chasm between the parents and the school was noted. A decisive factor in parent involvement was whether or not the parents felt a sense of ownership over the school. Implications for educational practice and policy are discussed. Five appendixes present interview guides, survey responses, and the parental consent form for participation. (Contains 4 tables, 3 figures, and 61 references.) (SLD)

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Parental Involvement in Schools:

Case Studies of Three High Schools in a Southeastern Metropolitan Area

A Research Report

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Parental Involvement in Schools:

Case Studies of Three High Schools in a Southeastern Metropolitan Area

A Research Report

Submitted by:

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Virginia Commonwealth University

January 20, 1996

Parental Involvement in Schools:

Case Studies of Three High Schools in a Southeastern Metropolitan Area

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Executive Summary

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BACKGROUND

Parental involvement in school is a topic that currently attracts much attention in educational debates and is one of the "Goals 2000." Research has demonstrated that involving parents in the process of educating their children provides substantial advantages -the more parents are involved, the more children benefit. Most of the literature, however, is quantitative in nature seeking to explain how parental involvement correlates with parents' socioeconomic, cultural, and racial background. Another strong focus in the literature is on programs that help parents get and stay involved in school. This study is intended to complement the literature, providing an in-depth analysis of the dynamic relationships between the school and parents in three high schools located in the metropolitan area of a southeastern urban center.

THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to unearth both degree and nature of parental involvement at three high schools. A brief survey of school personnel--distributed at faculty meetings--was used as an indicator of the degree of parental involvement at each school. Furthermore, teachers and staff were asked to nominate "involved" parents as well as parents who seem to perceive barriers to school involvement. Once the surveys had been analyzed, a total number of 52 in-depth interviews--lasting between 30 minutes and 2 hours-- were conducted with teachers, school administrators, staff, and "involved" as well as "uninvolved" parents. Fieldnotes were taken, interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Observations of events complemented

the data. The data was analyzed inductively and interpreted according to emerging themes and patterns.

FINDINGS

The following results were found:

- parental involvement differs drastically in both degree and nature not only between schools but also within schools. Two public high schools that are no more than 15 miles apart may look radically different in regard to the degree of parental involvement as well as school-community relations generally. And while a small group of vocal and visible parents may be highly engaged at one school, a majority may not be visibly engaged at all. The school where the greatest variance in parent participation was found (with a small group being extremely involved visibly and the majority being either not at all or silently involved) was Case 3 ("Rural High School"). At that particular school a highly stratified student body tracked into vocational or academic classes seems reflected by a stratified parent community, with some parents extremely involved visibly in school and others not visibly or not at all.

- it has to be recognized that parents may be involved in different ways, including "silent" encouragement at home of their children's educational activities.

- a high level of parental involvement does not automatically mean school-community relations that are generally perceived by the participants as positive and/or productive, as was demonstrated on the basis of the first case ("Suburban High School"). Rather, an engaged and vocal parent body may be perceived by educators as invading their professional sphere. Definitions of what "good" and "bad" parental involvement are, in other words, may be conflicting and differ not only between parents and educators but also among educators and within the parent community.

- parental involvement is not only shaped and defined by parent-school relations but also by the makeup of--and internal dynamics within--the parent community. As Suburban High illustrates, a fragmented, transient, and anonymous parent community negatively impacts parental identification with and involvement in school.

- in addition to the barriers to parental involvement mentioned by the literature (cultural, communication, resource barriers, etc.) a deeply felt chasm between the school and the community was found in one of the cases studied. Parents at City High--including parents of academically strong students--seem to lack trust and confidence that public schooling of the kind represented by the urban school studied here would provide their children with what they need in order to be

socially and economically successful.

- just as studies have shown that students' perceptions/assumptions concerning the value of education as means of upward mobility are important determinants of students' academic motivation and performance, this study suggests that the same is true for parents and their degree of involvement in their children's education. Another way of phrasing this finding is that one decisive factor in shaping parental involvement is whether or not the community of parents feels a sense of ownership over its own school, confident that the school will do the best possible job at preparing their children for life after school. Both the degree and type of parental involvement--as well as general parent attitude toward the school--seem shaped by these factors. While this study succeeded in unearthing these dynamics, more research needs to be done in order to better understand and analyze them.

IMPLICATIONS

The results suggest that any recommendations for educational practitioners and policy makers alike benefit from being context specific and concrete, taking the differences in degree and type of parental involvement--both within and among schools--into account. Parent communities, for instance, are not monolithic even if parents are characterized by a similar socio-economic and racial background. In order to foster and improve both quantity and quality of parental involvement at a given institution, school administrators are encouraged to first assess the specific strengths and weaknesses, barriers and enablers of parental involvement at their school.

Furthermore, this study suggests considering a differentiation between short-term and long-term goals to be achieved in order to improve parental involvement. Short term recommendations encompass such improvements as providing a parent meeting space at school, introducing voice mail and other devices in order to facilitate school-home communication, scheduling events sensitively to parents' schedules and needs, providing transportation to parents in order to enable them to attend events, etc. Long-term recommendations pertain, for instance, to strengthening the ties between the school and the community. This includes bringing the community into the schools as well as teachers and administrators into the community (home visits, church visits,

community centers, etc.), collaboration between schools, social service agencies and churches, as well as rethinking school districts and zoning, taking the important functions that schools have for their communities into account.

Findings: Parental Involvement (PI) in Three High Schools in a Southeastern Metropolitan Area

Suburban High

Degree and Nature of PI	Enablers of PI	Barriers to PI	Recommendations
High degree of diverse forms of pi (supporting education at home, visible pi supporting school activities, advocacy, PTA membership, etc.)	• parents' general satisfaction with quality of education Suburban High is able to provide • parents and educators at Suburban High living in the same neighborhoods/community • administration's receptive attitude toward pi • school policies geared toward increasing pi • specific programs that deliberately encourage pi • accessibility of educators at Suburban High • active PTA • efforts at effective communication with parents • "peer pressure among parents" to get involved in school • teachers' efforts to invite parents' involvement and support	•lack of consensus as to what constitutes "good" pi • marginalization of parents with minority status in regard to race, class, and educational background • alienation of parents due to influence of parent groups that are perceived as overly vocal and overpowering • community fractions: transient, anonymous, fractured parent community • attitudes of parents (preoccupation with careers; resignation due to perceived lack of influence over their children, etc.) • educators' "cold, professional" attitudes toward parents and efforts to protect their "professional sphere" against "intrusive" parents • parents' time constraints • poor communication system (ineffective phone system, etc.) • size of school ("big and traditional")	• initiate open dialogue about existing and potential school-parent relations; clarification of what constitutes "good" pi; efforts to include marginalized parents; efforts to overcome divisions within the parent community • building upon existing strengths: enablers of pi should be supported, enhanced, and used as models for the improvement of pi • establish a formal grievance procedure for parents • recognition and acceptance of silent pi • diversification

Findings: Parental Involvement (PI) in Three High Schools in a Southeastern Metropolitan Area

City High

Degree and Nature of PI	Enablers of PI	Barriers to PI	Recommendations
Low degree of visible pi in school, mostly crisis communication. Small group of parents, however, visibly involved supporting school activities (athletics, PTSA, etc.). Estimated small number actively supportive of children's education at home.	• events of value to parents/students (examples: financial aid workshop; event featuring student's talents; incentives given for parents to attend; special programs for talented students) • requiring parents to come to school (for instance topick up report card) • appropriate scheduling of events • involving parents in academic projects, special events • establishing contact with community organizations and churches, making home visits (presently not a practice) • continuous communication with parents • generally welcoming atmosphere toward parents, including administrators' demeanor	Mentioned by teachers: • transient community, frequent student transfer • lack of transportation • parents' time constraints • social conditions: teenage pregnancy, substance and spouse abuse, etc. • insufficient communication (parents inaccessible through telephone; home visits not made) • parents' lack of information and motivation • teachers' lack of time and space to contact parents • attitudinal barriers among teachers Mentioned by parents: • lack of ownership/identification with school as appropriate preparation for students' success in life • lack of trust/input in school's decisions • lack of communication on the part of educators, including invitations to parents to become involved • an internally divided community • effects of desegregation and inner-city deterioration	Short-term: • build upon existing strenghts, i.e. "enablers" • schedule events sensitively according to parents' needs • provide transportation • mail letters using envelopes not identifying senders • hold meetings in community • involve parents and students at meetings and events • communicate the school's needs • showcase success • avoid purely crisis-oriented communication • introduce open-communication forum • provide teachers who have special rapport with students/parents to be in charge of events/parent-teacher organizations, etc. • revisit the possibility of home visits • increase contact with feeder schools

Findings: Parental Involvement (PI) in Three High Schools in a Southeastern Metropolitan Area

City High

(continued)

Degree and Nature of PI	Enablers of PI	Barriers to PI	Recommendations
		Mentioned by parents: (continued) • lack of parent representation • school's reputation, perpetuated by the media • lack of understanding/ appreciation of teachers' roles and responsibilities • lack of identity-building measures at school	Long-term: (continued) • public relations and general education • improve community-school relations • initiate collaboration between schools and social service organizations/churches • rethink school districts and zoning • devise support systems, counseling, mentor/buddy systems for educators

Findings: Parental Involvement (PI) in Three High Schools in a Southeastern Metropolitan Area

Rural High School[1]

Degree and Nature of PI	Enablers of PI	Barriers to PI	Recommendations
• low to mediocre degree of pi; a small group of parents highly involved, especially in support of extracurricular activities. A large group not visibly involved in school.	• energetic and enthusiastic individuals • parents and educators living in the same neighborhoods/ community • old tradition and ties between school and community (many residents of the county served by Rural High are graduates of the school) • school events involving parents • community events involving the school (example: band playing at Christmas parade) • teachers' and staff members' inviting attitude toward parents • official functions/events designed to draw parents into the school • meetings involving student presentations and performances • frequent communication: example: interim sent halfway through grading period • class projects involving parents • involving parents in constructive disciplinary measures	• parents working long hours/ numerous jobs • parent attitude • student attitude • lack of communication • reluctance on the part of school staff/personnel • lack of time and space to privately contact parents • lacking school policy clarifying expectations regarding pi	• build upon existing strengths (enablers) • diversify parental involvement; invite a greater number of parents of students of different achievement levels; • newsletter and continuously upgraded school calendar should be sent regularly • discuss and establish general guidelines toward pi • organize parent workshops and other events attracting parents • improve communication with community at-large about events occurring at the school or performed by school organizations • communicate that different forms od pi are welcomed at Rural High

[1] Note: All parents interviewed at Rural High had been nominated as "involved parents." This research, consequently, does not reflect the perspectives of those parents who are not visibly involved in school.

Preface

This is the final report of a project sponsored by the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium. The Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium (MERC) is a collaborative research effort in central Virginia which involves Virginia Commonwealth University and six surrounding school districts: Chesterfield County, City Colonial Heights, Hanover County, Henrico County, City of Hopewell, and Richmond City. The six districts represent a cross-section of urban, suburban, and rural public schools.

This project was initiated in the fall of 1994 in order to provide information about how to understand and improve parental involvement in schools. The project was directed by Dr. Maike Philipsen who is solely responsible for the interpretations reflected in the final report. Clifford Fox served as Research Assistant, conducted several interviews and authored the Literature Review. The following school division representatives assisted this project as members of the study group accompanying the project from its inception to its publication, offering valuable critique and advise.

Chesterfield County Public Schools: Holly Rice

Hanover County Public Schools: Rosa Tapscott

Henrico County Public Schools: Paul Vecchione

Hopewell Public Schools: Sandra Morton

Powhatan County Public Schools: Mary Alligood

Richmond City Public Schools: Roberta Caston

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Parental Involvement in Schools: Case Studies of Three High Schools in a Southeastern Metropolitan Area

PURPOSE OF STUDY/OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study is to provide background information about parent involvement in school based upon the existing literature and to demonstrate--on the basis of three case studies--the dynamics that define, enable, and impede parent involvement. The main objective, in other words, is to analyze from a sociocultural perspective the complex dynamics creating and perpetuating both enablers and barriers to parental involvement. It is the author's intent to bring to life--and to analyze and interpret--the implications of various forms of school-community relations, expectations and interpretations of parent involvement, grounded in ethnographic data collected in one urban, one suburban, and one rural school. The intent is to sensitize educators, parents, and policy makers alike to the complexities of the issue involved and to offer ways of understanding and improving parent involvement in schools.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY/RATIONALE

Based on three qualitative case studies of high schools in a southeastern metropolitan area, this study discusses central questions relating to parent involvement in schools, an issue which attracts considerable attention in current educational debates: it is one of the "Goals 2000," and generally focused upon by school reformers, policy makers, educators, and others.

Research over the past several decades has shown that involving parents in the process of educating their children provides substantial advantages for their education (e.g., Stevenson

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and Baker, 1987; Henderson, 1987; Moles, 1982; et. al.). Many scholars have argued,furthermore, that parents' voices in school matters are a crucial component of an educational system in a democratic society (Fine, 1993). In a representative statement, Rebecca Crawford Burns summarizes the literature on the benefits of parent involvement to the educational process as follows:

> Meaningful parent involvement results in improved student achievement, attendance, motivation, self-esteem, and behavior. Parent involvement also is a major contributor to children's positive attitude toward school and teachers. Indeed, the more parents are involved, the more children benefit (Burns, 1993, p. 9).

And yet, there is also evidence that powerful barriers oftentimes prevent or limit parental involvement (Carrasquillo/London, 1993; Kelley, 1990). These barriers can only be tackled once we better understand the multiple faces and various interpretations of the nature of parent involvement in school. What, in other words, do we mean when we talk about--or call for--parent involvement in schools? What are the complex and socially situated dynamics that either foster or prevent different types of parent involvement? What meaning(s) does and should parent involvement have in a democratic society?

Most of the literature on parent involvement in school is quantitative in nature, seeking to explain how parent involvement correlates with parents differing along the lines of race, socioeconomic status, etc. Yet another strong focus in the literature is on programs that help parents get involved in school. This study is intended to complement the literature providing an in-depth look at the dynamic relationships between schools and parents. Questions pertaining not only to the degree but also the nature of parent involvement are raised. This study does not only describe who is involved and in what ways, but also how parent involvement is interpreted and

judged by school personnel and other parents. First-hand accounts of those parents who are labeled by school personnel as being uninvolved in school, furthermore, shed some light on their situations, on their attitudes toward school and education in general. It is important to listen to these voices rarely included in the literature in order to learn from these individuals directly as to why they are (perceived as) uninvolved in the schooling of their children.

Furthermore, while qualitative studies do not have the breadth and generalizability of quantitative studies, the premise of this study is that much can be learned from in-depth studies of cases which may be unique in many ways, and yet nevertheless teach lessons and provide challenging questions to educators and parents generally.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What is the degree and nature of parental involvement at a given school?
   - ♦ How do parents/teachers/administrators interpret, evaluate, and react to different types of parental involvement?
2. What are the barriers to parental involvement at a given school?
   - ♦ How did they evolve and how are they perpetuated?
3. What are the enablers of parental involvement at a given school?
   - ♦ How did they evolve, and how are they perpetuated?
4. What recommendations of specific use to practitioners can be derived from examples of both success and failure of individual teachers and/or schools to solicit active parental involvement?

LITERATURE REVIEW

TYPES OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

The problem of defining parent involvement is a daunting one. All too often in the literature, it is a problem not faced. The majority of sources considered gave no clear definition of the concept. Often the literature approaches parent involvement in a purely normative fashion--building a definition from a prescription for change. Thus, parent involvement becomes "partnership" (Burns, 1993) or "collaboration" (Swap, 1987). However, such broadly prescriptive definitions have limited usefulness in understanding the processes at work between parents and schools. Several sources dealt with the problem of definition either as a specific part of the theoretical framework from which they analyzed the existing relationship between parents and public education or took the problem of defining parent involvement as their primary research question.

By far the most systematic effort to define parent involvement has been that of Joyce Epstein (Epstein, 1992; 1988; 1987a; 1987b). To explain the complexity and diversity of parent involvement, Epstein draws on her own extensive research and a review of the available literature to establish a **typology of parent involvement** that divides parent involvement into six separate types. (For another typology of parent involvement, and cognitive/intellectual involvement, see Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994. For a good discussion of typologies of parent involvement in the United States and Great Britain, generally, see David, 1993). Each of Epstein's types is then subdivided into various involvement behaviors.

Below is a discussion of each of these types and the behaviors included in them:

Type 1. Basic Obligations of Parents

These obligations involve meeting the basic needs of their children including "providing for their children's food, clothing, shelter, health, safety, and general well-being" (Epstein, 1987a, p. 6). Beyond these basic needs, Epstein also includes parent obligations to prepare children for learning.

Type 2. Basic Obligations of Schools

This type of parent involvement is the obligation of schools to communicate from school to home concerning school programs and student progress. This element of involvement also includes an obligation to vary the form and frequency of communications such as memos, notices, report cards, and conferences to improve all parents' understanding of all school programs and children's progress" (Epstein, 1988, p. 59).

Type 3. Parent Involvement in School

This is the type of parent involvement most commonly examined in the literature on the subject. It includes all volunteer work in schools, such as classroom assistance, participation in fundraising activities, etc. Another category of involvement of this type is parents as audiences at student performances and assemblies, etc. A third category encompasses parent attendance at workshops and training sessions.

Type 4. Parent Involvement in Learning Activities at Home

This set of involvement behaviors grows out of the Type 1 Basic Obligations and includes efforts by parents to help with the development of general skills that do not duplicate the teacher's efforts, such as study habits, critical thinking, conversational skills, responsibility and sportsmanship, and basic social and personal skills, as well as efforts to assist with the

development of specific skills related to the lessons occurring in class, such as helping with homework, playing specific learning games, and working on specific sequences of skills needed for success in various subject areas. These activities may be initiated by either parent, teacher, or student, and may or may not involve direction by the teacher (Epstein, 1987a).

Type 5. Parent Involvement in Governance and Advocacy

This type of parent involvement is the one least discussed in Epstein's work, sometimes not even appearing in her typology (Epstein, 1987b). It includes "parents in decision-making and activist roles in governance and advocacy groups" (Epstein, 1987a, p. 9). She includes participation in PTA, PTO, or other school-connected groups in this category. It also includes participation in independent school watchdog and advocacy groups.

Type 6. Collaboration and Exchanges with the Community

This type of parent involvement is an addition to Epstein's original typology (Epstein, 1992) and includes those activities that help to connect schools, families, and students with the agencies, businesses, cultural groups, and community organizations that "share responsibility for young people's education and their future successes" (Epstein, 1992, p. 4). As with several of Epstein's types of involvement, this type requires a partnership of effort between parent and school.

BARRIERS TO PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Despite the clear evidence that parent involvement in their children's education has wide-ranging benefits, "parental involvement in school programs and activities remains rare" (Burns, 1993; p. 10; see also, Epstein, 1990; Leitch, 1988; Dornbusch, 1988; Moles, 1987; Swap, 1987; Chavkin, 1987). This has led to extensive research to identify barriers to parent involvement

which will be discussed in the next section.

Cultural Barriers

As the first section of this literature review indicates, there are varying perceptions of what parent involvement actually should be, based upon cultural and socioeconomic differences in parenting styles. This sets the stage for communication problems based upon the differing expectations of parents and teachers. Carrasquillo and London (1993) identify serious incongruities between the expectations of teachers and African American (pp. 13-30), Hispanic American (35-48), and Asian American (pp. 51-66) families with regard to parent involvement in child-rearing. Rebecca Crawford Burns reinforces the fact that "[d]ifferences between parents and teachers related to ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, and education represent a . . . barrier to home-school partnerships" (Burns, 1993, p. 14). Referring to Mannan and Blackwell (1992), she points to another facet of this barrier to parent involvement: "When the educational environment is not sensitive to the home language and home culture, communication is difficult and parents may feel unwelcome at school and psychologically discouraged from initiating a dialogue with their children's teachers" (Burns, 1993, p. 14). Don Davies goes further. He argues that, traditionally, communication between schools and ethnic parents has been negative since schools tend to see them as deficient and apathetic--in fact, the source of their children's problems (unpublished manuscript, cited in Chavkin, 1993, p. 179).

The role of gender in parent involvement is particularly problematic in the literature. In general, the literature fails to differentiate findings in terms of mothers and fathers. This obviously creates problems for determining whether one method is more effective with mothers or fathers. Much of the literature speaks of "parent," when it appears to assume the predominant

pattern of maternal involvement (Epstein, 1990). The changing structure of families, including the rise of single-parent households (Burns, 1993) and the increase in working mothers in two parent households, suggests that such assumptions may no longer be adequate, and may reduce the possibilities for increased paternal involvement. A reevaluation of the differentiated roles of mother and father in parent involvement would appear to be warranted (Biller, 1993; Mannon, 1992; Epstein, 1990; Lareau, 1989). Only limited efforts to this end are present in the literature (David, 1993; Biller, 1993; Epstein, 1990; Lareau, 1989). As with the ethnicity and class, gender must be understood as a contributing factor in communication problems concerning parent participation. The failure of teachers, parents and schools to recognize the intense challenges of cultural diversity in a climate of rapid socioeconomic change represents a major threshold barrier to parent involvement.

These cultural barriers obviously influence the attitudes and behaviors of teachers when dealing with parents of different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Teacher expectations, when frustrated by diverse parenting styles, often lead to attitudes that also function as barriers to the involvement of parents. The failure of parents to be involved as expected can lead "many teachers [to] feel that parents do not have the time or interest to interact with them" (Burns, 1993, p. 11), instead of being seen as a reflection of cultural or socioeconomic difference. These interpretations of parent behaviors can strongly influence teachers' efforts to encourage more and better parent involvement. For example, teachers who fail to use practices to encourage parent involvement who also teach children with parents that they estimate to have lower educational backgrounds are "more apt to report that the parents would not be able or willing to carry out activities related to the child's schoolwork at home" (Becker, 1982, p. 97). In every category of

teacher practice for parent involvement, Becker and Epstein found higher levels of "no support" for the techniques among teachers who estimated a lower educational level for the parents of their students. Even within the overall sample, they found teachers split almost evenly on whether "most parents--although they can teach their children to sew, use tools or play a sport--do not have enough training to teach their children to read or to solve math problems" (p. 89; see also, Burns, 1993). Thus, teachers often do not employ techniques that would encourage parent involvement in home learning activities due to assumptions concerning parent ability and willingness to do so (Epstein, 1983), despite the fact that the literature shows such efforts are more important to levels of involvement than any socioeconomic or other factor (Epstein, 1989a; article reprinted in Chavkin, 1993).

Given teacher's concerns about the ability of their students' parents to participate in the learning process, the improvement of parent skills in this area should logically be of concern to educational practitioners. However, the literature is not very encouraging on this point. As Becker and Epstein (1982) point out, "[a]lthough nearly 80 percent of the teachers [surveyed] conduct three or more parent conferences in a school year, only 7 percent initiate three or more group meetings or workshops for parents apart from school-sponsored parent nights" (p. 88). Moreover, fewer than 50 percent of teachers reported using any but the simplest techniques to "develop teaching and evaluation skills in parents--largely because these efforts were seen as unrealistic or parents were seen as lacking sufficient skills to attain them. Only "asking parents to come to observe the classroom (not to `help') for part of the day" had been tried by a majority of teachers (Becker, 1982). Obviously, teacher attitudes, in part arising from cultural and socioeconomic factors, influenced efforts to promote parent involvement. However, teacher

attitudes and perceptions are not totally unfounded, nor are they the only factors influencing teachers in their choice of practices to improve parent involvement. Beyond the attitudes of parents and teachers, whether based upon cultural and socioeconomic conditions or some other variable, are the severe resource barriers faced by both groups.

Resource Barriers

Epstein and Becker (1982) report that when asked to discuss issues related to parent involvement "many teachers" in a survey of 3700 teachers in about 600 Maryland schools "commented on the amount of time needed to prepare projects, workshops and/or directions to use and supervise at home." They then reflect the complexity of the problem facing teachers when they continued, "[t]he crucial question is whether the time required by the teacher is worth the trouble, and whether teachers should volunteer their time without knowing the likely effects of their efforts" (p. 103). The problem of limited time during the work day for teachers to develop and engage in parent involvement activities is a common feature of the literature (Swap, 1993; Kelley, 1990; Swap, 1987; Epstein, 1982; but see Leitch, 1988). Time limitations not only impact teacher efforts to build parent involvement, but also make parent involvement less satisfying to both parents and teachers when it does occur. Whether it is parent conferences, back to school nights, or telephone contacts, parent/teacher contacts are often rushed and frustrating (Swap, 1987; Epstein, 1983; Epstein, 1982). Of course, this assumes that time can be found for any kind of contact, at all. Both parents and teachers are under increasing demands for their time. "Time is precious; time is fragmented; teachers and parents are stressed by the multiple demands of their professional, family, and individual responsibilities and interests. These realities must be acknowledged" (Swap, 1987, p. 8). These realities must also be recognized as a major barrier

to parent involvement in education.

The changing nature of family life, as noted above, has also changed the time demands upon parents. As more parents are required to work longer hours to support their families, whether in a one or two parent family setting, involvement becomes more difficult. Therefore parents, like teachers, find time constraints to be a serious barrier to involvement. This is especially true for those types of involvement that require direct teacher/parent contact. Given the fact that most teacher working hours overlap parent working hours, such face to face contacts are difficult, at best. In "Improving Education for Minority Adolescents: Toward an Ecological Perspective on School Choice and Parent Involvement" in (Chavkin, 1993), Patricia Bauch reports that in her survey of 1070 secondary school parents, "Conflict with working hours" was the leading barrier to school involvement across all ethnic groups (p. 133). This finding is consistent within the literature (Burns, 1993; Swap, 1993; Leitch, 1988). Of course, limited time also acts as a barrier to parent involvement in home learning activities. Epstein reports that this fact also impacts the number and type of home learning activities that teachers are willing to encourage (Epstein, 1982; Becker, 1982).

Another resource barrier reported in the literature as impacting both parents and schools in their efforts to increase parent involvement is limited financial resources. For parents, limited financial resources have obvious consequences--even beyond the indirect demands such circumstances place on parent time resources. For some parents a lack of dependable transportation to attend school conferences or other school activities is cited as one result of inadequate financial resources (Burns, 1993). Moreover, many forms of parent involvement require a direct financial investment (i.e. bake sales, raffles, etc.). As noted above, economic

factors also influence parent and teacher attitudes about each other and their involvement behaviors (Burns, 1993; Mannon and Blackwell, 1992; Fine, 1990). Limited financial resources in the schools are also cited as barriers to increased parent involvement (Swap, 1993). Swap notes that in a time of shrinking budgets:

> [m]ost schools have chosen to concentrate the revenues that remain in essential personnel, programs, and supplies. These decisions make it difficult to initiate or maintain outreach programs for parents. Looked at in another way, such decisions also signal that schools do not consider home-school partnerships essential for their mission. The lack of availability of money for start-up or expansion of partnership activities is a psychological and practical barrier to successful outreach (p. 24).

Thus, the lack of financial resources in schools--as is the case with some parents--acts as a double-edged barrier to parent involvement, as it physically reduces the opportunities for such involvement, while also contributing to attitudes among parents that are themselves barriers to involvement.

While parent time and financial resources are being increasingly threatened by modern society, the literature also notes a reduction in the "incentives for parent responsibility," including reduced parent authority, shifting domains of socialization, and changing financial responsibilities (Schneider, 1993; Coleman, 1987). These changes reflect what Coleman refers to as the "erosion of social capital" (p. 37). This decline in the social support structures that have encouraged parent involvement in the past, reinforces the barriers to that involvement discussed elsewhere. Moreover, Coleman argues this has led to "a relaxed and inattentive parenthood" (1987, p. 35). Despite this argument, there is substantial empirical evidence that parents would like to be involved (Dauber, 1989; Epstein, 1989; Comer, 1986). Unfortunately, parents feel unsupported and ill-equipped in their efforts to participate in their children's education (Carrasquillo, 1993;

Dauber, 1989). When all of these factors are combined the calculus of modern parenthood works against substantial involvement.

Communication Barriers

Many of the barriers, discussed above, can be traced to problems in communication between parents, teachers, and schools. Improving communication should be a simple solution to them. However, since communication, itself, involves a form of parent involvement, it is adversely impacted by most of these same barriers. For example, better communication between low SES parents and teachers could help to reduce the misunderstandings that lead teachers to opt against teaching practices that would be particularly helpful in encouraging parent involvement. Ironically, the economic circumstances of the parents who could most benefit from this communication work against it. These communication "catch-22s" present the most challenging of the barriers to parent involvement.

A major contributing factor to communication barriers is that teachers are rarely trained to understand and involve the diverse range of parents with whom they will need to work (Burns, 1993; Swap, 1993; Chavkin, 1988). When 575 teacher educators were surveyed concerning the inclusion of parent-teacher relations training in their course, the results were indicative. Only "4% indicated they taught a complete course on the topic; 15% reported providing part of a course on parent involvement, and only 37% reported having one class period on the topic" (Chavkin, 1988, p. 87). This is in contrast to the literature reporting the need for such training. In the same study, Chavkin and Williams also surveyed 4,000 educators regarding their attitudes and experiences concerning teacher training for parent involvement. 86.6% agreed that training for working with parents was necessary (p. 87). Moreover, Burns reports "that many teachers admit

that they do not know how to involve parents in their classroom and still maintain their role as teacher, probably because they have not had the training and support needed to work with parents" (1993, p. 14). Parents also reflect the concern for better teacher training for communication with parents to encourage involvement. Dorothy Rich reports that in her Home and School Institute conferences on "Single-Parent Families and the Schools" and "Working Parents and Achieving Children," an often-heard priority for parents was "[i]n-service training for teachers and administrators in dealing with today's families, including improved communication between home and school" (Rich, 1987, p. 21).

The lack of training combines with the other barriers to parent involvement weave a complex web of communication failure. Obviously, language and perception differences make communication difficult or impossible. The shortage of bi-lingually trained teachers is a direct barrier to the involvement of minority language parents (Mannon, 1992). Even when language problems are not an obvious barrier, communication problems, arising from poor communication and conferencing skills on the part of teachers, are often attributed by both parents and teachers to attitudinal problems on the part of the other participant (Burns, 1993; Kelley, 1990). When combined with the time and financial barriers already discussed, this leads both teachers and parents to often judge involvement activities to be a poor investment of limited resources.

Two other factors are enumerated in the literature as contributing to poor communication as a barrier to parent involvement--ritualized communication and communication as a crisis activity. In discussing ritualized communication, Swap explains: "It is important to recognize that the blueprints we have created for interaction in American schools are ritualized and ineffective. They are ineffective for two basic reasons: they do not permit the development of

relationships and they do not contribute to effective problem solving" (Swap, 1987, p. 10). For Swap, the "fascinating aspect" of these ritual parent conferences, open houses, and Parent-Teacher Association meetings is "that the format is so obviously unsupportive of good relationships" (p. 12). Yet, these ritual events do make a contribution to parent involvement. They are important signals to parents that their presence is important. They become a barrier when they are perceived as an idealized version of parent/teacher collaboration--something they are always destined to fall short of--instead of invitations for additional contact. As Swap points out, when ritual events become an end unto themselves, they diminish "the energy and optimism that might be applied to developing additional or alternative formats for contact (`Meet with this parent again? But I just finished parent conferences!' `Go back to school for a program on Thursday night? You've got to be kidding!')" (pp. 14-15).

Beyond these ritualized communications, schools and parents--especially low SES parents with significant time constraints--primarily engage in crisis communication (Swap, 1993; Leitch, 1988; Swap, 1987). The implications of such limited communication are negative and wide-ranging for improving parent involvement. Much of the literature reports that parents frequently view communication from the school as a negative (Burns, 1993; Kelley, 1990; Swap, 1987; et. al.). Teachers also are reported as recognizing the negative quality of much home-school communication (Leitch, 1988). Teachers report having the most contact with the parents of students who are having discipline or learning difficulties (Becker, 1982). Obviously, this fact impacts the perception that parents have about how the schools view them (Carrasquillo, 1993). Moreover, since parents with limited time for school contacts spend an even larger percentage of their contacts in negative communication they are even more likely to be negatively impacted.

As Swap (1987) points out, crisis communications is difficult and dangerous. It is difficult for crisis communication to lead to a sense of collaboration and trust between parent and teacher. Such communication always involves a variety of strong emotions among all participants, including a sense of embarrassment and failure in parents and a sense of loss in teachers. The danger of denial is always present, as is the potential for blaming (Swap, 1987). Moreover, the communication of negative information takes special communication skills (Swap, 1993). Therefore, the widespread failure to train teachers for the skills needed for successful parent communication becomes an even greater barrier to effective and continued parent involvement in crisis situations.

INSTRUCTIONAL/ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS IMPACTING PARENT INVOLVEMENT

As the section on barriers to parent involvement indicates, certain institutional/ organizational factors act as barriers to involvement. The institutional value placed upon ritual events such as open house or teacher conference day for their own sake can have the effect of transforming these events from positive icebreakers for parent involvement into the barriers discussed above (Swap, 1987). Therefore, the literature would indicate that such institutionalized examples of parent involvement must be recognized and communicated to parents and practitioners as "invitations to additional contact," and not an end unto themselves (Swap, 1987, p. 14). Moreover, these events could be far more positive with an organized system of teacher training for parent involvement as a part of the process (Swap, 1993).

The ritualization of activities, discussed above, is one characteristic of organizations discussed by Davies (1987) in his discussion of parent involvement programs. In an effort to

explain why parent involvement remains low and resistance to it appears high "despite the currently fashionable rhetoric about the topic," he points to four important characteristics of all organizations:

- organizations perform their functions through routines or standard operating procedures that make possible regular and coordinated activity but make it difficult to respond to crisis or changing external demands (such as a school effectiveness project or a required citizen participation mechanism);
- organizations try to avoid uncertainty and seek stable internal and external relationships;
- organizational procedures and repertoires of activities usually only change incrementally and new activities typically consist of marginal adaptations of existing programs and activities;
- organizations will usually allow only a limited search for alternative solutions problems and generally will choose a course of action that "will do" rather than one that might seem optimum but would require higher risk or more change in standard operating procedures. (This is the organizational principle of "satisficing") (p. 158).

Beyond these characteristics of schools as organizations, generally, Davies also points out four other special characteristics that he identifies as special to schools as organizations:

- the goals of schools as organizations are diffuse, multifaceted, and subject to widely varied interpretations;
- the "technology" of achieving goals is fragmented with responsibilities divided among administrators, counselors, classroom teachers, teaching specialists, families, and the students themselves, and the connections between a particular activity and a given goal are often uncertain;
- the informal norms of school organizations are particularly powerful. The norms and specialized language of teachers as a professional group are buttressed by teachers' training and by their professional associations and unions. One such norm is "professional autonomy" in decision making;
- the formal structure of schools is unique. The various levels of decision-making activity--federal, state, district, school, and classroom--operate relatively

> independently from each other, with limited coordination and control. As many have pointed out, public education is a loosely coupled system. This means that mandates from one level to another are never self-enforcing (p. 159).

These "organizational realities" help to explain the frustrations and failures in improving parent involvement. Programs to improve parent involvement must take these factors into consideration or they will also face the resistance that arises from these organizational realities.

The literature points to several organizational changes that can have a positive impact on parent involvement. Organizing for a more open and welcoming environment seems to be a common theme (Swap, 1993; Epstein, 1991; Kelley, 1990; et. al.). Positive organizational features include: the provision of a full-time coordinator for family/school programs--at least at the district level, at the school level, if possible; and making physical space for parents in the school, itself. This space could also serve as a parent-friendly space for parent/teacher interactions. A variety of school-level initiatives have been shown to be effective in developing parent involvement (Epstein, 1982). The literature also points to the importance of providing for parent input in governance and advocacy. This requires the development of structures that facilitate and utilize this input (Swap, 1993; Epstein, 1990; Epstein, 1989b). The literature also reports parent and teacher feelings of disconnection from the larger systems of control in school systems (Leitch, 1988). Thus, the more decision-making occurs at the larger system level--school board, city council, etc.--the less parents are encouraged to be involved (David, 1993; Leitch; 1988). This points to the paradoxical position occupied by division leadership in encouraging parent involvement through policy. Therefore, a discussion of division leadership and policy for parent involvement is warranted.

DIVISION LEADERSHIP AND SCHOOL POLICIES IMPACTING PARENT INVOLVEMENT

As noted above, organizational factors often make parent involvement programs difficult to implement successfully. In such an environment, it is important to consider the impact of policy mandates for overcoming organizational resistance. The Institute for Responsive Education in studying state mandates for parent and citizen participation found that a mandate, "whether it is a policy of a local school board or a state or federal law, is likely to work best if:

- the policies are specific and prescriptive,
- periodic evaluation and monitoring are required, and
- support (money, technical assistance, staff time) is provided to assist implementation" (Davies, 1987, p. 160-161).

Moreover, the literature suggests that parents should be brought into governance and advocacy programs for schools. This involvement is an important avenue for expanded involvement of parents and also improves attitudes about involvement among teachers and administrators (Swap, 1993; Epstein, 1990; Epstein, 1992).

Unfortunately, research by Chavkin and Williams indicates that division leadership often has a narrow view of parent involvement--"failing to encompass the full range of parent interests and abilities (1987, p. 169). In a survey of 2538 school superintendents and 2423 school board presidents, they found that these district level leaders supported parent involvement as a concept and recognized its value to the educational process. While supporting the traditional, ritualized forms of participation, a large majority of these administrative officials (over 88%) *disagreed most strongly* with parents being involved in shared decision--making activities--school administrative

decisions such as teacher selection, equipment purchases, and teacher assignments; job performance evaluations of teachers; and job performance evaluations of principals. This finding was consistent throughout the survey. When the opinions of parents (n = 3103) were compared to these results, it was obvious that while parents and administrators both view involvement as an important part of the educational process, they disagreed over what types of involvement were useful. As Chavkin and Williams note:

> Parents expressed strong *support* for parent involvement in the schools, and they were *in accord* with administrators' views that parent involvement was an important component of education. The differences between parents and administrators are *most* evident in the area of shared decision making. Parents felt that they were trained enough to help *make* school decisions, that they should have the *final* word in decisions about their own children's education, and that they should help evaluate teachers and principals. Administrators *disagreed* and did not perceive it as useful to have parents involved in any of these areas (p. 180).

Thus, parents and division leadership appear to have strong disagreements in the breadth of what parent involvement is useful and appropriate. It is desirable, therefore, that prior to developing policies on the subject, "administrators and parents must get together and build a mutual base of understanding about the goals of parent involvement . . . . Such an approach will help to ensure parent involvement that is mutually acceptable to and agreed upon by the partners" (p. 181).

Once mutually supported policies are developed, the literature indicates that they can have a positive influence on parent involvement and student achievement (Chrispeels, 1991; Henderson, 1987). However, the evidence is far from consistent. Often parent and teacher attitudes work against program success. As Chrispeels reports in discussing California's state policy on developing parent involvement:

> Although policies cannot mandate changes in beliefs, they can serve several useful functions. First, policies create an institutionally sanctioned framework to guide practice by determining, for example, what type of parent involvement activities should have priority. Second, policies express "official" beliefs that can, over time, influence the beliefs of others. Third, policies supported by effective strategies for implementation can apply pressure for change by recognizing, supporting, and rewarding specific attitudes and behaviors (Chrispeels, 1991, p. 368).

It must also be recognized that mandated programs, like any programs, for developing parent involvement will take time to be effective (Epstein, 1991). Perhaps the best evidence for the advantages of policy mandates for parent involvement can be seen in the programs that have been developed to meet the requirements of Chapter 1 where creative approaches have led to real gains (D'Angelo, 1991).

Davies sums up the research on policy mandates as follows:

> A mandate for parent involvement should be seen as a necessary but not sufficient condition to produce positive involvement in its varied forms. The mandate simply provides the framework. Since mandates are not self-enforcing, mechanisms for monitoring, enforcing, and providing technical assistance during the implementation of new programs are also clearly needed (Davies, 1987, p. 160).

ENABLERS TO PARENT INVOLVEMENT

The preponderance of the literature on parent involvement focuses upon the improvement of the home-school relationship. Much of it analyzes single aspects of the problem--either one style of involvement or case studies of existing programs for the enhancement of involvement. The exceptions to this pattern are some of the broad-based surveys of Joyce Epstein and her collaborators, and the prescriptive literature that proposes programs based upon the empirical evidence available and certain normative assumptions. To review this varied literature, generalizable conclusions available in the literature concerning enablers for parent involvement will be discussed.

School and Teacher Practices of Parent Involvement

The strongest conclusion available in the literature concerning improved parent involvement is that school and teacher practices of parent involvement largely get the desired result (Epstein, 1990; Dauber, 1989; Epstein, 1984; Epstein, 1983; Becker, 1982; among others). Moreover, school and teacher practices are more important in improving parent involvement than any other variable--including race, parent education, family size, or family structure. This variable is even more important than grade level--a very important variable for parent involvement. However, in the upper grades, the influence of status becomes a stronger predictor of parent involvement. One explanation for this difference is the decline in teacher practices that encourage parent involvement in the upper grade levels, thus increasing the impact of other influences (Epstein, 1990; Dornbusch, 1988; Bauch, 1988). It is also important to consider the nature of the school and teacher practices that are utilized at the various grade levels.

Epstein strongly recommends that practices to encourage parent involvement be tailored to all of the types of parent involvement in her typology. However, the balance in emphasis among these types must be varied according to circumstances. At higher grade levels, strategies must change (Dornbusch, 1988; Baker, 1986). For example, as grade level increases, parents report that they feel less qualified to help their children with home study (Epstein, 1983), although they continue to express the same level of interest in involvement (Dornbusch, 1988). Despite their interest, research has shown that involvement declines as grade level increases (Pisapia and Hoyt, 1994). Thus, teacher practices to involve these parents should take into account the change in parent role perception, so as to attempt to maintain some form of involvement. The research

shows a willingness among parents to be flexible in their involvement behaviors (Baker, 1986). It is important that teacher practices mirror this flexibility. Moreover, changing student attitudes concerning their parents' involvement can also impact the effectiveness of teacher practices (Dornbusch, 1988). At the higher grade levels, involvement that is more inclusive in the school environment may need to give way to other forms of involvement. Research has indicated that involvement in learning activities at home are the most effective for improved achievement at all levels (Epstein, 1983). However, given the perception of parents concerning their skill level in these activities, supplementary training may need to be made available for them. Epstein reports that her research has shown that "parents received most ideas for home learning activities from teachers who were rated by principals or parents as leaders in parent involvement activities. A variety of techniques to involve parents in learning activities at home are discussed by Becker and Epstein (1982). While this list of activities is not exhaustive, it may be useful to list them for reference:

Activities Emphasizing Reading

- Ask parents to read to their child regularly or to listen to the child read.
- Loan books, workbooks, etc. to a parent to keep at home for short periods as extra learning material.
- Ask parents to take their child to the library.

Learning Through Discussion

- Ask parents to get their child to talk about what he/she did that day in your classroom.
- Give an assignment that requires the children to ask their parents questions -for example, that children write about their parents' experiences.

- Ask parents (one or more) to watch a specific television program with their child and to discuss the program afterwards.

Informal Learning Activities at Home

- Suggest ways for parents to incorporate their child into their own activities at home that would be educationally enriching.
- Send home suggestions for game or group activities related to the child's schoolwork that can be played by parent and child.
- Suggest how parents might use the home environment (materials and activities of daily life) to stimulate their child's interest in reading, math, etc.

Contracts Between Teacher and Parent

- Establish a formal agreement where the parent supervises and assists the child in completing homework tasks.
- Establish a formal agreement where the child provides rewards and/or penalties based on the child's school performance or behavior.

Developing Teaching and Evaluation Skills in Parents

- Ask parents to come to observe the classroom (not to "help") for part of a day.
- Explain to parents certain techniques for teaching, for making learning materials, or for planning lessons.
- Give a questionnaire to parents so they can evaluate their child's progress, or provide some feedback to you (Becker, 1982, pp. 92-93).

Beyond merely engaging parents in activities that supplement school-based learning are those activities that encourage parents to improve the overall home environment for the child's cognitive development. While these activities still fall within type four of Epstein's typology (i.e. parent involvement in learning activities at home), they also include some type one activities (i.e. basic obligations of parents). Programs to involve parents in these activities are sometimes called "home intervention." "Most broadly defined, home intervention is a term used to describe any

program that sets out to help a family foster children's mental and/or physical development (Kellaghan, 1993, p. 84). Such programs vary from the comprehensive approach, which concerns itself with the economic, educational, health, and social service aspects of the family, to the highly particularized programs that are much closer to the programs associated with parent skill training in the Epstein model (for an extended discussion see Kellaghan, 1993). It must be remembered that these suggestions cover only one--or in the case of a comprehensive home intervention program, two--of Epstein's five types of parent involvement, and a fully effective program should cover them all. Moreover, each teacher practice or school program must be aimed at the needs of particular parents and children, each within a special environment. Understanding that environment becomes an important enabler for parent involvement.

Understanding the Home Environment

The literature points to teacher understanding of student home environments as an important enabler for parent involvement. The literature reports that parents and teachers who have similar home environments are more likely to engage in cooperative behaviors (Leitch, 1988). For example, "teachers who were parenting were generally realistic about the constraints faced by working parents " (p. 74). However, in many cases the differences between teachers and parents are real. "[F]ar fewer teachers than parents were single parents; the teachers were older on the average than the parents; they were, on average, better off economically; and they were better educated. They were also more knowledgeable than parents about the limitations of the school system" (p. 74). These SES differences account for the "attitudinal distance" that often complicates and constrains parent involvement. As discussed above, differences are also present due to ethnicity, race, language, and gender. Increasing teacher awareness of these differences

can pay dividends in parent involvement (Julian, 1994; Carrasquillo, 1993; Chavkin, 1993). While in-service training and improved teacher education in this area can help to improve awareness of the diversity of home environments surrounding any public school (Chavkin, 1988; 1993), perhaps the strongest catalyst to improved attitudes among parents and teachers is face to face contact. Experience has indicated that home visits are one of the best methods for increasing parent-teacher awareness and cooperation (D'Angelo, 1991; Davies, 1991). While home visits are important, they are also time-consuming and often difficult to coordinate. However, less difficult face to face contacts between parents and schools are possible. The key is in improving the communication that occurs.

Improving Communication

Among the most important enablers for improved parent involvement are programs to improve the quality and quantity of home-school communication. The quality of communication will be improved by reducing the "attitudinal distance" between parents and teachers. However, this requires an emphasis upon communication that is not exclusively crisis-centered and that can facilitate the building of a trusting, respecting relationship between parents, teachers, and administrators. A major part of the process of building such communication involves meeting parents "where they are" and attempting to include them in the broad range of the educational activities (Epstein, 1990; Swap, 1987; Swap, 1990). Establishing activities that facilitate positive communication can be particularly useful. Susan McAllister Swap suggests the following activities as examples:

Activities for Building Relationships:
Teachers' Reports of Ideas that have Worked for Them

1. Happy-Gram. Send home a weekly Happy-Gram telling one good thing that the child did that week.

2. Call Hour. Establish an evening hour to call each week.

3. Newsletter. Send home a weekly newsletter. It might include information about what the children have been doing, ideas for special projects, anecdotes, reports of joint or individual accomplishments, cartoons and children's art work, announcements of important expectations or upcoming meetings, and the teacher's telephone number.

4. Diary. Invite each child to keep a diary throughout the year. Allot five minutes a day for each child to write in his/her diary. Include photos. Ask the children to share these with their parents at regular intervals.

5. Photo essay. Throughout the year, keep a photo record of important or interesting events. As they are developed, post the pictures in the classroom for parents to see. At the end of the year, allow parents to order any pictures they would like to keep. Variation: Ask children to write or dictate stories to go with each picture. Keep stories and pictures in a scrap book that children and parents can examine in subsequent years to learn about the class.

6. Board for parents. Put up a bulletin board for parents at the front door of the classroom or wherever they are most likely to see it. Post articles of interest and invite parents to contribute.

7. Special day. At the beginning of the year, schedule a special day for each child. Invite the child's parents.

8. Lunch. Invite parents to join the class (or school) for lunch.

9. Father's Workshop (or Mother's or Grandparents). Open the school on Saturday from nine to one. Invite fathers to share their special skills or interests with the child and teachers.

10. Parents' Night. Invite parents to learn about activities and expectations for your class. Show slides of the sequence of activities for a sample day. The parents enjoy learning about the day and seeing their children in candid shots. Variation: Repeat the program at a breakfast to which parents and children are invited.

11. Show and Tell. Have a show and tell in which every child is invited to bring in something to illustrate them (teddy bears, transportation, toys, stuffed animals, favorite books). Create a display. Invite each child to explain why the object is special. Invite mothers (grandparents, siblings) to come.

12. Alphabet Days. (For children who are learning the alphabet). Set up a schedule for when you are going to introduce each letter of the alphabet. Share the schedule with parents and invited them to send in any object that would illustrate that letter. Make an alphabet story book that lists or shows all these objections. Variation: Rainbow collage (for children who are learning colors). The teacher made a rainbow which covered one whole wall. Parents and children were urged to bring in colored objects from home that could be glued onto the appropriate band of the rainbow.

13. Parent Party. Have a party for parents at the beginning of the year. Find out if they have any strengths or special skills that they might like to share with you and the children in the classroom (e.g., knowing about the celebrations of a particular religion or culture, creative writing, music, art, puppetry, organizations of volunteers, science, computers).

14. Thanksgiving Celebration. Have a potluck meal, in which each family is asked to bring a traditional Thanksgiving food or something special from their culture. Have name tags and an activity in which parents have the opportunity to talk with parents whom they do not already know.

15. Breakfast Conference. (Especially for families where both parents are employed.) Schedule conferences before school starts and offer coffee and danish (Swap, 1987, p. 26-27)

While some of these activities are not appropriate for all grade levels, they give examples of ways in which creative opportunities for positive communication can be established. It should also be noticed that several activities are planned for working parents. Time is obviously a major constraint upon parent involvement, as well as for teachers who might choose to plan activities for parents. However, improvements in communications technology have made staying in touch with parents easier for schools and teachers.

Communications technology allows teachers and parents to communicate more often.

Among the possible uses of communications technology mentioned in the literature are:

Hot Lines and Help Lines

Dial-in systems are widely used to provide, among other services: help with questions about homework; parenting counseling and referrals when needed; school-related information--either by tape loop or sometimes with a menu of recorded messages. These services have proved effective in a wide range of applications (see e.g. D'Angelo, 1991).

Automated Calling

These systems allow prerecorded messages to be delivered to a selected group of parents automatically. The systems are especially good for notification concerning parent involvement activities, in addition to certain negative forms of communication for which it was originally developed (e.g. notification of student absences) (Burns, 1993).

Voice Mail and Voice Messaging

Voice mail is a relatively new and exciting use of communications technology. It is used to provide a 24 hour per day message from teachers and administrators to parents or students with the added benefit of allowing the parent or student to leave a message for the teacher or administrator in their "mailbox." Rebecca Crawford Burns cites 1992 data from 20 Vermont schools that use a voice mail system. She reports heavy use of the system, with "[m]ore than 86% of parents and 90% of teachers [using it]" (1993, p. 38). While this technology shows great promise, its ultimate usefulness is yet to be seen.

Computer Applications

At least one experiment has taken place utilizing inexpensive lap top computers for language arts instruction, both in schools and at home. The computers were used to provide a link

between the classroom and home. The program began with an open-house for parents explaining the use of the lap tops and explaining the program. Although anecdotal, the program was very successful in improving student achievement. However, its impact on parent involvement was unclear (Smith, 1994). Innovative uses of computer technology, although more costly than other forms of communications technology, may be an important resource for the future. Several publications are available through the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium that deal with the uses of technology in the classroom. For an extensive review of the literature on educational technology, see Learning technologies in the classroom: Review of literature (Pisapia, Schlesinger, & Parks, 1993) and Learning technologies in the classroom: Annotated bibliography (Parks & Pisapia, 1994). For a richer discussion of the use of educational technologies, see Learning technologies in the classroom: A study of results (Pisapia & Perlman, 1992) and Learning technologies in the classroom: Lessons learned from technology intensive schools (Pisapia, 1993).

Organization and Leadership for Parent Involvement

The literature emphasizes the importance of school leadership and organization as enablers for parent involvement. As Epstein reports, a school environment that supports teacher practices for parent involvement is more likely to see such practices occur (1991; 1983; 1982). Moreover, division support can be the determining factor for the success of parent involvement programs--especially technical and financial support (Davies, 1991). For entrenched organizations, like most schools, federal, state, or division-level policies can have a positive impact on parent involvement--if those policies are developed cooperatively with parents and teachers and are supported properly (Davies, 1987). Providing a coordinator of home-school programs, whether at the school or

division level, requires financial resources that may be beyond the limits of an individual school. Technical innovations in communication also require financial support that would require a commitment of resources beyond that available at the school level.

Individual schools can make organizational changes that will encourage parent involvement. In-service training in communication and conferencing techniques, as well as sensitivity training for the changing family environment can be helpful (Julian, 1994; Carrasquillo, 1993; Swap, 1993). Efforts to reconceptualize ritualized parent contacts such as conference day or parent night can be valuable. Remember that ritualized events should never be an end unto themselves. They should merely be an opportunity to encourage further contact. "Determine what they do and do not accomplish. Find out what parents, teachers, and principals want them to accomplish. Finally, experiment with alternative or additional formats that will help you to achieve your goals. And then remind yourself to examine the effectiveness of these formats after a trial period" (Swap, 1987, p. 15). Schools can also take steps to make their physical surroundings more open to parents. Maintaining a parent room in the school can help to achieve this goal. Finally, schools must develop and support a comprehensive plan for parent involvement that involves parents from the start and recognizes the diversity of parents and types of parent involvement.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA SOURCES

This study combines quantitative and qualitative components. A brief initial written survey was used to indicate the general degree and nature of parental involvement at six high schools. Two high schools belonged to each of the following categories:

- suburban, high socioeconomic status
- urban, low socioeconomic status
- rural, mixed socioeconomic status

Teachers and administrators were asked to rate the level of parental involvement at their school, and to give reasons as to why they think parental involvement is the way they see it to be. They were also asked to nominate potential participants for the study. The survey, in other words, was used as an indicator of how school personnel rated parental involvement at their school, and as to how cooperative the school would be in their participation in the study. On the basis of survey return rates, three sites were chosen for the study, one out of each category described above. This study, consequently, involves three high schools in a southeastern metropolitan area which differ significantly in regard to location, resources, as well as racial makeup and socioeconomic status of the communities they serve. One suburban school serves a middle to upper middle class, predominantly White community, one inner-city school serves mainly working class and Black communities (among them six high-crime project areas), and one schools serves a rural community that is racially mixed and lower middle to middle class.

This study goes beyond a mere outcome-orientation and does not just describe the extent of parental involvement in given schools. Rather, it focuses on the processes that either lead to

success or barriers in regard to parental involvement. Consequently, qualitative, interpretative case studies were chosen as the most appropriate research design. This design allowed the researcher to conduct an inductive, in-depth study of selected cases adopting a holistic perspective on all factors that contribute to success, limits or failure of such a complex dynamic as school-parent interaction.

Interpretative case studies ". . . contain rich, thick description . . . . A case study researcher gathers as much information about the problem as possible with the intent of interpreting or theorizing about the phenomenon" (Merriam, 1988:28). The researcher in this study, in other words, intends to unearth, describe, and interpret the meaning of processes that lead to (or prevent) parental involvement. Factors involved in these processes include: attitudes and behavior of school administrators, teachers, and parents; school climate; role of parent organizations; relationship between school and community in general, to name only a few.

The most appropriate methods of data collection for this study consist of:

- in-depth, open-ended interviews with a diverse body of participants who provide multiple perspectives on the issue (parents, teachers, administrators, students, etc.) using an interview guide as framework;
- analysis of documents pertaining to parental involvement in schools, for instance: school policies, project proposals/descriptions pertaining to the enhancement of parental involvement in schools, etc.;
- observations of PTA meetings and other events of teacher-parent contact.

The validity of the study is enhanced by triangulation of methods, researchers, and participants. Furthermore, preliminary findings of this study were shared and discussed with

participants whose reactions further refined the final analysis of the data.

SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS:

Participants for this study were selected in a variety of ways:

1. criterion-based sampling: survey to school personnel asking nominations of parents and teachers on the basis of 3 categories:
    a. teachers who have unique experience dealing with parental involvement because they have, for instance, introduced innovative techniques to encourage parental involvement)
    b. parents who are highly involved in school
    c. parents who seem to perceive barriers to school involvement
2. snowball sampling (participants refer to potential participants)

Accessibility of participants varied greatly. Teachers and school staff members were generally highly accessible and willing to grant interviews. They were, however, oftentimes restricted in time. Parents who had been nominated as "involved" were both willing to grant interviews an to talk at length. It was very difficult, finally, to get in contact with parents who seem to perceive barriers to parental involvement. School personnel, as well as other parents, were reluctant to nominate them or make referrals. In one case no names of "uninvolved" parents were given to the researchers. In other cases, "uninvolved" parents lived in communities inaccessible to the researchers for safety reasons, or did not show to interview appointments, or could not be contacted by telephone. A total number of 98 teachers/staff members were surveyed, and 52 interviews conducted (3 interviews were conducted by phone). The following illustrates number and nature of surveys/interviews conducted at different settings:

1. Suburban High: 45 surveys with teachers/staff

9 interviews with teachers/staff

8 interviews with parents (4 nominated as "involved," 3 nominated as "uninvolved," 1 parent who had been contacted through snowball sampling and is not easily classified)

2. City High: 28 surveys with teachers/staff

10 interviews with teachers/staff/former staff

1 interview with elementary school principal serving a socio-economically similar student population

9 interviews with parents (4 nominated as "involved," 2 nominated as "uninvolved," 3 "uninvolved" parents who had been contacted through "snowballing.")

3. Rural High: 25 surveys with teachers/staff

9 interviews with teachers

6 interviews with parents (all nominated as "involved")

INTERVIEW PROCEDURE

Prior to the interview, the participant was informed about the nature and objectives of the project, and asked for written consent to participate in the study (Appendix E). The interviews were open-ended and semi-structured in nature, conducted on the basis of an interview guide (see Appendix A). While the interview guide was used to ensure that all relevant questions were being asked, participants nevertheless influenced both the length and the nature of the conversations

considerably. They participated actively in structuring the interview, determining topical emphasis, etc. Almost all interviews were tape recorded after permission had been obtained from participants. They were transcribed verbatim. Detailed fieldnotes were taken in order to record the settings in general, and observations of significant events in particular.

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of the initial survey was used as indicator of the nature and degree of parental involvement of the six schools initially surveyed. The qualitative data was studied carefully, organized, classified, coded, analyzed, and interpreted on the basis of emerging patterns. The three cases were analyzed individually using mostly the same categories in each case with slight variations. The inductive approach used in this study entailed that indigenous concepts be allowed to emerge from the data. Those concepts differed naturally to some degree from case to case. One concept emerging in the case of the urban school, for instance, was that of "social conditions" as they influence parental involvement in school. That concept did not emerge and did not have much significance in the case of the Suburban school. The data analysis resulted in the:

- description and interpretation of degree and nature of parental involvement in selected schools as perceived by various groups and/or individuals;
- identification of barriers and enablers to parental involvement in the schools studied;
- recommendations--grounded in and derived from the data obtained--how to enhance parental involvement in schools.

This report consists of an analysis of each individual case as well as a cross-case analysis in which findings are compared and general conclusions drawn. It follows, then, that the three

cases--while offering numerous avenues of comparison--can be viewed as three separate studies and read in isolation. A brief comparison featuring what can be learned from similarities and difference among the three cases, is, however, provided at the end of this report.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

It should be noted that while this report provides an in-depth analysis of parental involvement at three different schools, it is not generalizable, i.e. not based on a representative sample of the population. The author's concern in portraying the findings focused on validity, not statistical reliability. Findings are based on what promises to capture the "essence" of the experiences of parents with teachers and teachers with parents at the three schools. At the same time, "untypical" experiences also find representation. The author is confident that the cases portray attitudes and behaviors that are widespread at all three schools. And yet, it cannot be claimed that the study is exhaustive or captures all perspectives present at the schools studied. Time and resource constraints simply did not allow for that.

In some cases the small sample of a particular "type" of participants is a concern. Parents who were nominated as "uninvolved," in particular, are represented only in small numbers. In one case, Rural High school, they are not at all represented. Time constraints simply did not allow the researcher to extend the labor intense process of contacting "uninvolved" parents, thus enlarging the pool of participants in the study. More research ought to be conducted dealing with the perspectives of these parents specifically.

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RESULTS

CASE 1: PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AT SUBURBAN HIGH

SETTING:

Suburban High School (pseudonym) is located in an affluent suburban community in the metropolitan area. It served 1689 students in 1994/1995, 9th through 12th grade, predominantly from middle to upper middle class backgrounds. In 1993/94, 90.2% of Suburban High school students were Caucasian, 5% Asian American, 3.8% African American, and 1% Hispanic.

Suburban High enjoys a reputation as a "good" school, one of the "best" in the metropolitan area, and was frequently cited by parents as one--if not the only--reason why the family moved to the area serving Suburban High. By the beginning of the academic year of 1995, 1% of the student population in grades 9 through 12 had dropped out. 94.7% of 1994 school graduates continued their education, 82% in four-year college programs.

DATA COLLECTION

The researchers surveyed 45 Suburban High School teachers and conducted a total of 9 in-depth, open-ended interviews with teachers and staff, and 7 interviews with parents. Parent interviews included those who had been nominated by teachers as "involved" and "uninvolved" parents.

FINDINGS

DEGREE OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Both the survey and interviews with both faculty/staff and parents indicated that participants generally rated the level of parent involvement--of any kind--as high at Suburban

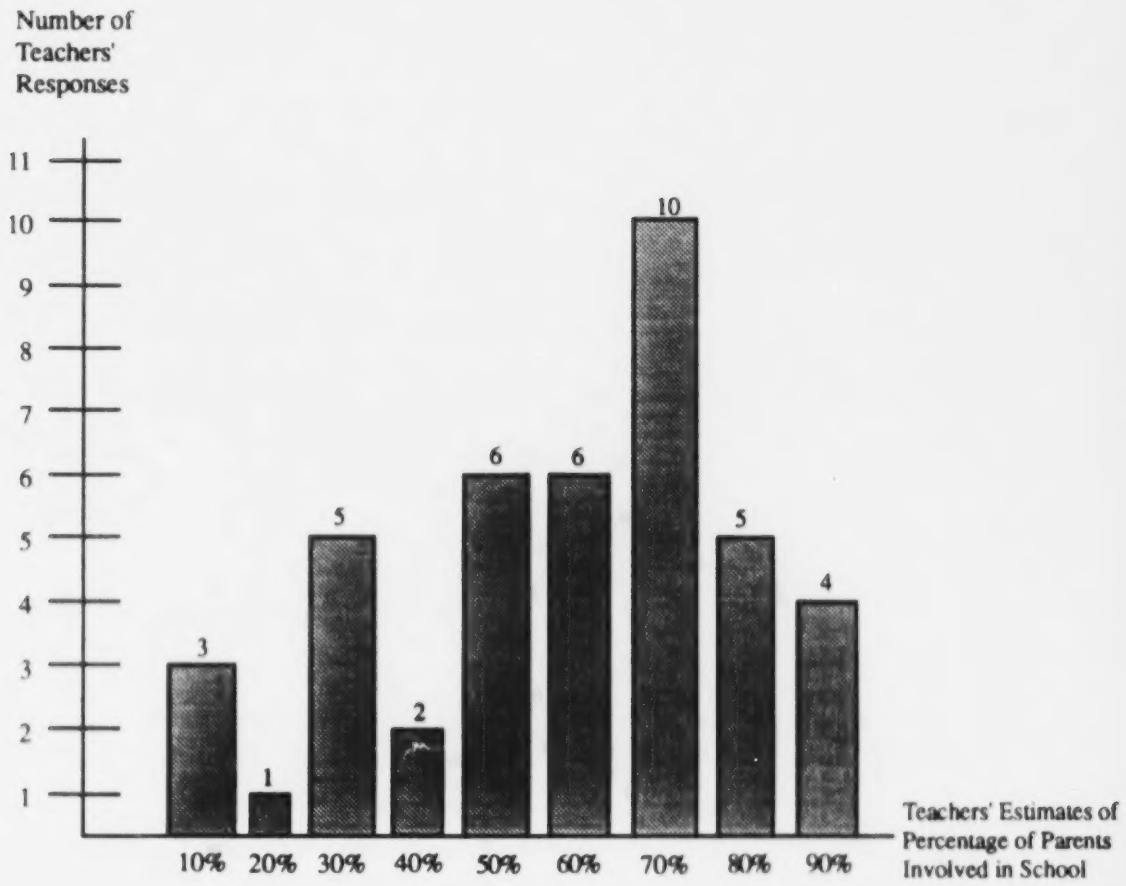
High school. The survey demonstrated that 29 out of 45 teachers rated parental involvement as very high, 13 as high, and only 3 as moderate. The following quotes illustrate the point:

> "We have a lot of parent involvement." (Staff P1)
>
> "I think there is a large percentage of parents who are involved with their children in school." (Teacher Q1)
>
> "Parental involvement, I think, in general is very good here. They do a lot for the school." (Teacher R1)

When asked to estimate the percentage of parents involved in school the mode (most frequently occurring number)--according to teachers--was 70 (10 teachers estimated 70% of the parents were involved). The following table demonstrates the distribution of teachers' estimates of parental involvement at Suburban High, or--put differently--it shows how many teachers estimated a certain percentage of parents being involved in school:

Suburban High School

Teachers' Estimates of Percentage of Parents Involved in School



(Note: (3) survey respondents did not give percentages)

Most teachers, additionally, indicated in their survey responses that they view the quality of parent involvement at Suburban High as very good or good (17 teachers found the quality of parent involvement to be very good, 19 good, 1 moderate and one poor). This particular finding, however, will be further examined in the following sections based primarily on qualitative data. In summary, Suburban High is perceived by its teachers to have high to very high parental involvement which is of high quality. Note: the above mentioned findings are mainly based on teachers' impressions of parent involvement and not an accurate measurement of actually existing parent involvement which would have been beyond the scope of this study.

Question 4 simply asked participants to give reasons as to why they thought parent involvement is the way they see it ("Why do you think parent involvement is like this at your school?"). 43 participants responded, 34 listed reasons with positive connotations, 9 listed reasons that carry negative connotations (for listing of comments see Appendix B). In summary, parent involvement seems to carry mostly positive connotations for the participants, and is seen in connection with strong parental interest and investment in education. Yet there do exist some feelings among teachers that parents are overly willing to interfere and control business that is not theirs, or get involved in school for the "wrong reasons." Most comments locate the cause of the high degree of parental involvement within the parent community. They do not, in other words, attribute the high degree of parental involvement to school policies and/or lack of personnel efforts.

TYPES OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

While the survey data provide a quantitative look at estimates of the extent of parent involvement at Suburban High, in-depth interviews allow to explore the nature and qualitative

elements of parent involvement in more detail. The following research questions are answered in this section:

- what types of parent involvement are prevalent at Suburban High?
- how do parents/teachers/administrators interpret, evaluate, and react to different types of parental involvement?

Parents at Suburban High are involved in their children's education in various ways. The following section portrays this variety, incorporating parts of Joyce Epstein's typology of parent involvement in schools (Epstein, 1992; 1988; 1987a; 1987b).

- **Supporting education at home:** Due to the generally high living standard of Suburban High parents, it is assumed that they fulfill what Epstein described as basic obligations such as "providing for their children's food, clothing, shelter, health, safety, and general well-being" (Epstein, 1987a, p. 6).[1] In addition, the data shows that they generally prepare children for learning, creating and maintaining home conditions that are supportive of school learning and behavior. Parents' general "quiet" support of education includes what Epstein called "parent involvement in learning activities at home" (Epstein, 1987). Teachers described parents as setting high standards for their children, the school, and for themselves to further the students' education.

> "We are in a school that has a lot of . . . families who are achievers, they really want their students to do well, the majority of them do. And so we have a lot of parent involvement." (Teacher P1)

Parents described their own involvement as "active, encouraging, helping with homework" (Parent A1). Their "quiet" involvement encompasses verbally stressing the importance of education, providing quiet work spaces, keeping students involved in reading, exposing them to educational experiences such as museums, hiring tutors, "checking" on school assignments, to name just a

few. Parental involvement in matters of school, in other words, takes places privately, perhaps even unnoticed by teachers. Parents may be perceived by teachers as uninvolved in school, and yet turn out to be very much involved in creating an environment at home that is supportive of education.

Indeed, parents were nominated for this study as "uninvolved" in school, while interviews revealed that they are very much "quietly" involved and concerned about their children's education. Teachers' perception of parent involvement, though, may impact not only how parents are perceived but also teacher relationships with students. One parent who is highly active and visible in the school building illustrates this point as follows:

> "I do think that a lot of times kids of involved parents might be given a second chance quicker. They [teachers] might come and say `You know, your son did such and such. You want to talk to him before we proceed.'" (Parent 10)

Implication: It is, consequently, important to emphasize that parents being "uninvolved in school" does not necessarily translate into uninvolvement in children's lives in general, and education in particular. To realize this can positively impact teachers' attitudes toward allparents--including those who are presumably "not involved" in school--as well as their relationships with the children of so called uninvolved parents.

- **Visible parent involvement supporting school activities:** this type of parent involvement comprises type three and four of Epstein's typology (Epstein 1992; 1988; 1987a; 1987b). It includes volunteer work in school and parents serving as audiences at student performances,

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[1] The word "assumed" is used deliberately because this type of parent involvement was never mentioned by participants as constituting a problem.

games, competitions, etc. It is the kind of involvement which is not only most commonly examined in the literature on the subject but also seemed to first come to mind of Suburban High teachers and parents when asked to comment upon parent involvement.

Participants in this study agreed that this type of parental involvement is very strong at Suburban High. It encompasses a wide array of activities. The PTA includes approximately 1,500 parent members, 500-700 of whom are active. The PTA runs a school bookstore for 4 hours every day involving 200-300 parents a year. Parents are involved in sports boosters; they support the drama department, sponsor academic clubs, do landscaping, organize after-prom parties, raise funds (approximately $25,000 in 1994), volunteer to do office work, and more.

A related form of parental involvement is willingness of parents to communicate with teachers, to have parent-teacher conferences, to respond to teachers' phone calls, etc. Generally, teachers voiced their satisfaction in this regard.

> "The support I've had in my classes has been terrific. Whenever I felt the need to talk to a parent about a problem or an academic success, they've always been most cooperative. Parent visitation day, almost inevitably they will say `please let us know if you need anything else from us.'" (Teacher R1)

To be sure, teachers also indicated that parents of so called "lower level students" tend to be less involved and less responsive.

Implication: Generally, visible parent involvement in school--though, once again, being only one possible way of supporting students' education--was described as extremely high by teachers and staff. It serves several purposes. For one, it is a tremendous resource for the school, making many events and activities easier, if not possible. Furthermore, it impacts teachers, making them

feel supported in their pursuits, as the following quote indicates:

> "I sponsor a club, and we're talking over two hundred kids. I could pick up the phone at any time and call the parents and say `I need help with something,' and I would receive that help. I mean, it's not whether I would receive it, it's what time do I want it." (Teacher Q1)

Visible parent involvement in school, furthermore, is an effective way of signaling to students that parents "care," as the following quote reveals:

> "I think it is important for the whole family, sister, siblings, anybody be aware of what is going on in the child's world and have that support . . . . Be involved even if it is nothing more than going to an assembly, or if they [the kids] are third string in a ball game, go to it, show up. I think it is really important for children to know that there is somebody behind them." (Parent B11)

Visible parent involvement in school activities can also get or keep students involved in extracurricular activities, and thus in school generally. Yet another positive effect is that of community and identity building: parents signaling through their attendance of, for instance, sports events that they support the school community.

> "Oh, it's wonderful. The kids, the coaches, the school administrators, it's such a wonderful feeling when you go into a gym or on a football field or soccer, baseball, no matter what the sport is, and you see the fans are there . . . . When you go to the play which is happening this weekend, it's just unbelievable to see that many adults are there, and then you're thinking parents, family members, aunts, uncles, grandparents, it's wonderful. Even the choral groups and the band, oh my gosh, when they put on a presentation in your school, the parking lot is filled." (Staff W2)

Given the importance of visible parent involvement--real and symbolic--Suburban High school should continue to foster this type of parent-school interaction. And yet, it became obvious that a high degree of visible parent involvement in school activities does not automatically translate into good, healthy school-community relations. Quite to the contrary, this type of involvement can coexist with negative feelings on both sides--parents and teachers--about the relationship

between the school and the parents. It is, furthermore, an intense and time consuming commitment on the part of the parents which simply cannot be expected of everyone.

Changes Over Time

The decrease of parental involvement over time surfaced as a theme with educators and parents at Suburban High. One parent recounts that her involvement changed more to "crisis type involvement," another parent saw the decrease of parent involvement as a natural development as children grow older and assume more responsibility. And yet, in comparison with other schools studied, this theme occurred relatively seldom. Quite to the contrary, parents talked about their own involvement as "having stayed the same over time." The nature of this study does not, however, allow definite conclusions in this regard. Only a comprehensive parent survey could determine how many parents would actually judge their involvement as declining over time.

From the educators' perspective, parent involvement has not declined during their careers at Suburban High. One staff member observed that it fluctuates slightly from year to year depending on the makeup and nature of the parent body. One teacher openly argued against adopting techniques to get parents involved in school because s/he is convinced that " . . . in high school, you're past that. I think it's up to the individual." (Teacher S4)

Given the generally high level of parent involvement at Suburban High, such attitudes may not have much of a negative effect. It does not, however, help those parents who indeed perceive barriers to getting or staying involved in school.

SO-CALLED BAD INVOLVEMENT: THE POWER OF MISMATCHES BETWEEN UNDERSTANDINGS OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

As indicated above, a strong presence of parents may not always be understood and/or

appreciated by teachers and administrators. Nor may it always be an indication of healthy school-parent relations. Furthermore, a strong presence of parents in regard to supporting school-related activities is not the type of parent involvement some parents deem desirable. They understand productive parental involvement in school to include child advocacy and participation in school governance and policy making. This type of parent involvement, on the other hand, may be discouraged by teachers and administrators who are protecting what they consider to be their professional autonomy (compare Chavkin/Williams, 1987, for disagreements on what type of parental involvement is deemed appropriate by parents on the one hand, and administrators, on the other). All of these dynamics seem to be at play at Suburban High, as the following analysis reveals.

A recurring and powerful theme in conversations with teachers and staff was the differentiation between "good" and "bad" parent involvement and the strongly felt notion that there are Suburban High parents who tend to be "overinvolved" or involved in the "wrong kind of way." "Good" involvement was usually defined as being supportive of teachers' and the school's endeavors without interfering in the professional sphere of teachers, without exerting too much pressure on students and teachers, without "smothering" either one of them.

"Bad" involvement, on the other hand, can take many different forms which will be analyzed separately for the sake of clarity:

1. **Overprotection**

Participants in this study--both teachers/staff and parents--frequently mentioned that most students at Suburban High are from privileged backgrounds and frequently "overprotected". Parents' overprotection, according to participants, manifests itself in efforts

by parents to control students' lives in order to protect them from failure. Students are seen as developing a narrow, unrealistic or "glossy" outlook on things, unable to take responsibility for their actions and unprepared to live independent lives, as the following quotes illustrate:

> "The kids who go there [to Suburban High], it is so prejudiced, I mean they don't know what real life is like `cause they're all rich." (Parent C5)

> "They (parents) call the school because they still think that Johnny needs to know that Johnny needs to go by the dentist on the way home, and that kind of stuff . . . . Sometimes I think they hold on tight. I mean we're bringing lunch money . . . . I think you need to let go when they get to high school. What are they going to do when they get to college? They're like total little infants out there, they've been so spoon fed." (Staff and Parent P1, 5)

> "I think children forget that their world is a very limited world and that not everybody is like them. And they make the assumption that everybody has the same education, the same opportunities, and shares the same beliefs." (Teacher V5)

> "In terms of social and cultural composition and diversity and that sort of thing, it is very homogeneous, and in that sense I think that it provides a kind of false view of what the world is like for kids." (Parent A1)

> "I do think the kids are beginning to be isolated, and they see things through rose-colored glasses sometimes . . . . The parents don't let their kids be real people." (Parent B8, 9)

From the teachers' perspective overprotection also manifests itself in parents blaming teachers--or the school generally--for any problem their child(ren) may encounter. Those parents, according to teachers . . .

> " . . . are so defensive when it comes to their children, whatever the problem is, their child cannot possibly be doing it, or be responsible for the problem, or contribute to the problem. It must be the school's fault; now that can be the teacher, that can be the school, from principal on down to the janitor. . . . Also, parents who consider that I'm picking on their children will as soon as possible transfer the blame." (Teacher Q7)

It is important to note that the dynamics illustrated above are by no means generalizable to all parents. Many parents--and this type of study does not permit use of concrete

numbers--do not fall into the category of overprotective parents but rather, realize the importance of teaching their children to be responsible. Their attitude toward parent involvement may well be captured by the following quote:

> "I think being involved sometimes means letting your child handle it. You are involved in knowing when to and when not to [interfere]." (Parent B6)

Implication: The shared consensus among teachers/staff and parents at Suburban High that overprotection and privileged upbringing constitute a problem, has ramifications not only for those students directly implicated but also for those at the fringes of the community. Some parents seem to feel as if they do not quite fit into the generally privileged parent community at Suburban High. Issues of diversity and community as they relate to--and constitute a problem for--Suburban High parents and educators will be further analyzed in below.

2. **Exaggerated Advocacy**

One problem mentioned by teachers was parents defending the interests of their children regardless of the moral implications of such actions.

> "I do think that there are also parents who are what they consider very involved in their children's lives, and of course in school, but it may not be the positive way that they think, as far as what they're doing. And we have many parents who feel the end justifies the means. And whatever it takes to get that, or whatever it takes to complete something, whether it's doing the work for the child, or doing something else, the bottom line is that some kids don't think some things are wrong because they see the parents do it, and there does not seem to be anything wrong with it." (Teacher Q1)

> "We have problems with the parents calling and saying my child was sick at home and he's coming to school late. Well, he wasn't sick at home, he was at McDonald's eating. That's too much parent involvement . . . . Well, when the parents lie, or not take responsibility of making the kids own up to it, that just sets up a whole system of things. `Well, then I don't have to come on time to take the test, my mother will say I was sick and I can take my test' . . . . And that . . . just undermines the things we're trying to do in the school system, as far as teaching those rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democracy." (Teacher V6)

Parental involvement that was perceived as being morally questionable frequently surfaced as a theme in the context of parents typically being achievement and success-oriented and thus concerned about grades and their children's competitiveness for college entrance.

> "You know you do have some parents consumed by grades." (Teacher T1)

> "Most parents assume their children are going either to Duke or to Harvard or some big name school when they enter ninth grade." (Teacher S1)

> "A lot of parents want their children in honors [classes], whether they're to be there or not . . . . Professional people live in our area, very intelligent, educated, I mean . . . . So they want the same thing for their children, so of course, you've got 1700 and some odd children in our school that are all college bound, or the majority of them are . . . . And all want that GPA, and the parents want the honors, honors, honors . . . ." (Staff W2)

3. **"Smothering Students and Teachers"**

Even if parent involvement is not seen as morally wrong, parents' concern for academic achievement, according to teachers, frequently leads them to unduly interfere and exert too much pressure on both teachers and students. The following passage illustrates nicely what the teacher considers "appropriate" parent involvement--supporting teachers generally, helping out with volunteer activities--and unduly interference or "smothering" behavior toward both the student and the teacher.

> "We have both kinds of involvement here. We have the parents who are behind you one hundred percent and recognize you as a human being . . . and they figure you are doing the best job you can do. And they're going to help out and support you, you know, the after prom parties, the football games, the concession stands . . . . Unfortunately, I think there are a lot of parents who feel that their involvement has to be very personal involvement with each of their individual teachers. And I think that can be smothering, on a hostile level especially to the kid and the teacher."

According to teachers, some parents' extreme concern about grades and their children's achievement leads them not only to interfere in the teacher's professional spheres but also to

prevent the students from independent decision making, from taking responsibility for their actions, and thus essentially from "growing up." One staff member was extremely concerned about parent pressure on the one hand, and the school's compliance in overly regulating and controlling students, thus basically failing to prepare them for adult life. According to this participant, severe problems such as extreme student stress, drugs and alcohol abuse are frequently the consequence of students simply feeling "smothered." These problems, however, are seen to be largely denied and ignored.

> "A lot of our parents want that "A" because their child is in competition with the child next to them to go to college. There is a time in our school . . . when the guidance counselor has told the children their GPA, and I see kids crying that week, telling me `I didn't know I was that stupid, I'm so dumb, I'm only number 23 on my test' . . . . I think the community at some point should back off. And I think this school should back off, too . . . . I see what happens, like there's children where teachers sit there and do interims and FDC, and then they'll make a comment--noisy in class, doesn't hand in homework. Well, I see what happens when that kid gets home (slap, slap, slap) . . . . And I've seen kids come into this school who have been abused because of that report . . . . I don't understand this. We have so many rules and regulations . . . . Even with parents `you will be home by 10, you will not do this, you will do this,' and then they become a senior, they graduate on June 15, and then it's like `bye.' We don't put them in a transition at all, and now they're expected to go to college . . . . I mean these kids aren't allowed to go to the bathroom [in school]. These teachers have been told they can't roam the hall . . . . There's something wrong here with all these kids doing drugs and drinking. There's something wrong here, and I go back to the family. What kind of pressure are we putting on these kids?
>
> Question: Would you say that is a problem, alcohol, drugs?
>
> Answer: There's definitely a problem here with drugs and alcohol. Our administration doesn't want to see it, but I see it and I hear it and I know these kids are doing drugs and drinking, sometimes every day after school, sometimes before school, some kids do it here, some kids do it weekends . . . . Oh yeah, it's a major problem, and so is sex." (Staff W7-10)

Other participants--one former student at Suburban High as well as a parent--mentioned alcohol and drug abuse as largely ignored problems as well. One parent described her unsuccessful

attempts of organizing other parents to do something about rampant drinking.

> "And they want you to believe it's this big happy family type of environment. But it's not. You still got the discipline problems, you've still got high school pregnancies, the drugs and the alcohol at that school are unbelievable. Unbelievable . . . . The parents really surprised me here . . . . I said could we get together and get this parent networking going. They all thought I was nuts. They would rather just turn their heads and ignore the situation and let it by . . . ." (Parent C8-10)

But even if students are not involved in irresponsible sex or alcohol and drug abuse (which, of course, are by no means always the result of too much pressure but can originate from other causes as well) the problem of exerting too much pressure on students--leading to immense peer pressure among them--seems to be a widespread one. "The peer pressure at Suburban High is really fearsome . . . the pressure that is put on the kids by parents to succeed." (Parent B9).

It is important to mark, however, that--from some parents' perspectives--it is the school just as much as parents that puts too much pressure on the students. One parent remarked that the school is trying in many ways to be a college. And another parent made the following remarks:

> "I don't think that the school is particularly interested in kids. Well, let me rephrase that. I had heard before I went there that they weren't particularly interested in kids that could not perform in classes. That if they couldn't do the work, they weren't interested." (Parent F2)

The question of "who pressures whom" at Suburban High may not be easily answered. Behind this issue, however, seems to lurk yet another topic that is troubling the Suburban High community: that of teachers' professional spheres. The following quote once again deals with student pressure, but also raises the important issue of teacher professionalism.

> "The kids know the parents are checking on them all the time, with everything they do. And there comes a time when a high school kid sometimes rebels against that. So that type of involvement sometimes backfires against the parent. They have to learn to let the kid pass or fail on his own . . . . These parents here, their idea of involvement is just to stay on that kid all the time, and what they need is just to back off and let that child be

> responsible for his own actions . . . . So we have the extremely involved parents and then what I call a truly involved parent, who . . . realize we're doing the best we can, and they're going to support us." (Teacher S1)

The aforementioned quote portrays, once again, the "truly" involved parent as the one basically supportive of whatever the teacher is trying to do. Once parents move beyond that line they are perceived as interfering in the professional realm of teachers. This interference is not only felt by teachers in regard to grading and pressuring students to do well academically, but also in the context of parents trying to gain a voice in decision making and school governance.

4. **Interfering in Teachers' Professional Sphere**

The question as to whether or not teachers are and should be considered "professionals" and if so, in what sense, has a long history (compare Welker, 1992). Up to this day educators seek to construct and defend a certain degree of professional autonomy while--simultaneously--being publicly governed and held accountable.

This struggle is apparent at Suburban High. Teachers and staff struggle to protect their professional sphere in which--as they see it--parents frequently intrude. They voiced their concern about parents who "are used to being the boss in their businesses and professional arenas and have never been told `no.'" (Staff U1). As mentioned above, they draw lines between what they considered "appropriate" and "inappropriate" parent involvement, and those lines are directly related to teachers' understanding of their professional sphere. Appropriate parent involvement basically centers around supporting the teachers in their endeavors, offering services, while accepting the teacher as the authority in matters of educating children. "Inappropriate" parent involvement, on the other hand, may well be perceived by parents as appropriate forms of child advocacy or attempts at participation in school governance. Teachers may not see it that way.

The following quote reveals the criteria teachers draw when judging parent involvement:

> "I think involvement means different things to different people. I think there are parents who are silently involved, in that they support the teachers in their efforts, they support the school, work through the PTA in supporting the programs that the kids are involved in by offering their services. And then I think there are some parents who think that involvement means challenging or questioning every single thing that happens, all the time, making sure that their opinion has been heard, their advice is listened to. And they are usually unhappy if not paid attention to, and acted on." (Teacher S1).

Some parents, on the other hand, view it as their right to make their opinions heard and to assume a larger role in the education of their children and the control of the school than could be expressed through volunteer work. They criticize the missing opportunities provided for them to actively participate in school governance. This parent perspective is captured in the following quote:

> "I would like to see parents more involved in curriculum and in setting policy but that doesn't happen in most schools, and it certainly does not happen at Suburban High . . . . There is no tradition of citizen involvement in the schools in Virginia, and there is no encouragement of it, and when people and parents try to get involved, what they want is parent support for like the club, and the athletics, and that sort of thing. They don't want parental input in the curriculum, and the hiring, or talking about the ability and the capacity of teachers to do a decent job. Those are seen as trouble makers . . . . They never asked for parental involvement except in the band boosters, and athletic boosters, and that sort of thing . . . . All of the mechanisms of community controlled schools, virtually none of them are offered at Suburban High . . . . There is a high level of involvement that raised a lot of money for the band and the athletic programs. There is tremendous, 90 some percent, who belong to the PTA and come to PTA meetings, and go to athletic events. And by that definition there is a lot of involvement. And also being a middle class school, there is a lot of concern about the programs and their kids getting into college, and all that sort of thing. By that definition, there is parental involvement. By definition of curriculum or policy, there is not." (Parent A3/4)

The above quote can be interpreted as containing what Connell and others (1982) describe as a tendency among members of the upper class to view teachers as workers . . . .

> ". . . from the perspective of employers, which of course many of them are. They don't hire teachers personally, but they can, if sufficiently dissatisfied with their performance,

> sometimes cause them to be fired. Their picture of teachers, then, is much more that of technical specialists who are evaluated according to the results they produce in their area of expertise." (Connell, 1982:59)

One parent is convinced that some parents attempt to indeed control the teachers:

> "As long as this area is so wealthy, like I said, the rich trying to control the teachers. I feel kind of sorry for the teachers in a way." (Parent C11)

Teachers, on the other hand, struggle to assert themselves as professionals "in charge" of the students' education. Their definition of "good" parent involvement--namely supporting teachers in their activities--attests to that. As one staff member said: "We want them [parents] here but we don't want them to know what we're doing. You know, it's like being observed." (Staff W4) Teachers, consequently, use a variety of techniques in order to gain parents' respect and control over their own professional sphere. Examples encompass:

- struggling to make parents obey to certain rules. Example: parents have to inform the school one day in advance if they wish their child to leave school early, driving him/herself;
- telling parents what needs to be done in order to further their children's education, assuring parents of the high quality instruction their children receive in a given class (thus appealing to parents' trust in teachers' professional abilities);
- demonstrating to parents the quality of instruction through recognition beyond the school walls; example: successful student participation in regional and other types of competitions,

> ". . . you don't care about the kids, boy, you get that to the point that you want to throw up. Well, you hear that you don't even like students . . . . And all of a sudden you get students . . . who go into that competition, and when that student who is making a C or B in my class realizes that `gosh,

> I beat 130 kids . . . . I must really know some stuff.' And so all of a sudden the parents realize, hey that guy [the teacher] is not lying to us."

- creating and maintaining a positive reputation among parents; example: one teacher conveyed how he calls parents to tell them that their child has done well in school in order for them to talk in positive terms to other parents about him:

> "I call parents of students who have done very well . . . . If you get these people in your corner. That's very important because what you are going to find is that you have some parents whose child is not doing very well, and they are going to want to say negative things about the teacher . . . . So you try to make some positive strides with parents whose children have done well going `gosh, this guy has gone out of his way to call us' . . . . And then all of a sudden you've got these people out there talking. They're real proud that their teacher has called them, so they want to kind of brag about that and tell all the people. And so now you've opened up an avenue of communication . . . ." (Teacher T4, 5)

- conveying to parents the moral dimensions of teacher (i.e. the ethical obligations, rights, and responsibilities of both students and teachers);

- diffusing crises in order not to alienate parents which, in turn, creates the necessary space for teachers to operate.

> "I think that what I've found that works with parents is that in any situation, I don't go on the attack. In fact, sometimes parents are very upset because of grades and so forth, and usually the louder they get, the quieter I get because to put myself in an adversarial position does absolutely no good. It's not professional and it doesn't get anywhere with the parents. And that's all they remember." (Teacher Q4)

In summary, the role and status of teachers as professionals seems to be a "muddled," if not controversial, issue at Suburban High shaping parent-teacher interactions significantly. A somewhat contradictory attitude toward parent involvement exists that was well captured by a participant:

> "The school system really doesn't ever discourage parents getting involved. I think silently they do to a point, like `look, the rules are this, we're the educators, and you're just the parents,' but basically they want them involved." (Teacher W4)

Implications: Although the literature, educational programs and policy proposals are generally based on the assumption that a high degree of parent involvement is positively related to students' success in school, it is important to differentiate between different kinds of parent involvement and to take a close look at their effects on teachers and students. Questions of parental involvement are not merely quantitative in nature ("How many parents are involved?" and "How do we get more parents to be involved in school?"). Rather, it is important to analyze the types of parent involvement prevalent at a given school and to realize negative repercussions of certain forms of parent involvement due to a mismatch of understandings as to what constitutes desirable parent involvement. In the case of Suburban High this mismatch goes beyond idiosyncratic dynamics at the school, reflecting a general tension plaguing the educational profession: to negotiate educators' professional control with public input in education.

The touchy issue of "teachers as experts" or "teachers as professionals" has to be tackled in some form if educators and parents wish to craft partnerships on the basis of a shared understanding as to what positive and appropriate parent involvement should be. It is recommended that school staff/faculty and parents engage in an open dialogue concerning these questions. What is seen as productive school-parent interaction? How can teachers' needs for professional space, students' needs for responsible learning, and parents' needs for a strong voice in matters of school governance be achieved? The larger question lurking behind these issues is as taxing as it is vital for healthy school-community relations: how to democratically run a school. While this may be a rather elusive long-term goal for the Suburban High community, it is

nevertheless feasible that all those concerned begin to engage in the dialogue about how to achieve it.

Yet, another issue needs to be addressed in this context. The strongly felt notion on the part of Suburban High teachers that "parents should just leave those kids alone" may be based on interactions with a--albeit highly vocal and visible--parent minority. This attitude, however, may shape teacher attitudes toward parents in general, and by generally failing to encourage parent involvement those parents whose children would benefit from increased involvement fail to be invited or encouraged. This point is further analyzed in the section "Barriers to Parental Involvement."

WHAT WORKS: ENABLERS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Enablers to parent involvement here is defined as conditions and actions that promote, encourage, and/or maintain any kind of parent involvement in school that is generally seen as positive by the participants of this study. What, in other words, helps parents to get and to stay involved in school?

Positive factors named by parents include:

- general satisfaction with what the school has to offer: parents repeatedly voiced their satisfaction with the quality of education at Suburban High, the level of courses offered, the facilities (sports, science, etc.), even the peer pressure that challenges students to do their best.

> "I was really impressed with the professional manner in which it [a crisis intervention on behalf of a student] was carried out. Being thorough, and yet I felt they [school personnel] were warm and caring too. It was not a cold procedure where I felt that they were just there to read me what they had on their papers. The teachers have been cooperative as far as they

could be with a student like X. X has gone through some rough times during her time at Suburban High, and they have been as willing as I have been to be in contact." (Parent D2)

- a generally open and receptive attitude on the part of the administration toward parent involvement;
- specific programs (such as the math/science program) that deliberately encourage parent involvement;
- general accessibility; parents state that they "find it easy to get in touch with people at Suburban High even if I don't have really good information on who I'm looking for." (Parent D6)
- an active PTA making strong recruitment and involvement efforts; example: at the beginning of the year the PTA includes in their mailing a list of possible activities in which parents are invited to participate. If interested, they can check off items on the list and return the list with their membership form.
- efforts at good, effective communication; example: "back-to-school-night" advertised in multiple ways: mail, word-of-mouth through children, marque in front of the school building;

Teachers, on the other hand, engage in a variety of techniques in order to foster parent involvement and positive relationships with parents (note that definitions as to what constitutes "good" parent involvement may differ between teachers and parents, as shown in the previous section). The following list represents examples of teachers' attitudes, actions, and behaviors toward parents.

- display of a positive attitude toward parents

> "If I am very positive and very present, even if I have to call home about a problem, the more positive I am the less likely the parent will be to act defensively . . . that will give me the opening to offer suggestions." (Teacher Q4)

Displaying a positive attitude encompasses being conscious of certain mannerisms and "ways of talking" to parents in conferences.

> "When you talk to them [parents] in the classroom you certainly don't sit down at the desk and they sit at the other side of the desk. I sit with them, either at chairs or at student desks. It's a barrier type thing. And I don't care who the student is you can find something positive to say to start your conversation, even if it's a negative agenda . . . or if they're a little nervous, put them at ease. Or let them know that their child is not a total loss." (Teacher R5)

This particular teacher demonstrated furthermore how to create a partnership particularly with parents who seem to need support in realizing that

> ". . . ultimately the child has to make the decision . . . some of those parents are really frustrated. It just helps them to know that somebody else sees the same characteristics that they see and that somebody else sympathizes with them and is willing to help." (Teacher R5)

- issuing of invitations to parents and soliciting parents' input in class at the beginning of the school year. Parents are invited to observe the class, or to talk about their area of professional expertise if it relates to the subject matter taught (Example: teacher inviting a professional therapist to talk about eating disorders in her sociology class).

> "I know there is a wealth of knowledge in this community, and it's not being tapped into on a regular basis." (Teacher V2, 3)

- attempts to communicate potential failure early through phone calls and early notification;

- making special arrangements for crisis communication, example: one teacher sets aside a regular time for a parent whose child is experiencing difficulties in school to call her;
- communication of academic successes and other positive developments in order to avoid pure crisis communication;

> "I talk to parents when there is no problem. Sometimes I just like to call parents and tell them their children are doing well. They've always seemed very grateful, appreciative of that." (Teacher R1)

- handing out check lists to parents with invitations to contribute to the classroom in different ways (working in the bookstore, bringing a dish of food to an event, etc.)
- consciously striving to get parents involved in the subject matter taught in class. One teacher relates how she encourages students to discuss with their parents topics of general interest that surfaced in class, i.e. taxes, current events. These strategies serve the dual purpose of enriching class discussions and conversations about school between students and parents at home.

Other efforts at soliciting parents' input occur in the foreign language and social studies departments where foreign parents are invited to talk about certain issues and share their experiences.

Furthermore, teachers enumerated the following factors as enablers:

- peer pressure among parents: "Sometimes parents will rope some of these parents who are not really involved into doing something through the PTA, through a sports thing." (Teacher Q3)
- "Back-to-school-night" which is well attended and seen as an effective way of

introducing teachers to parents, familiarizing parents with expectations, "ground rules" and assignments, as well as providing a basis for future communication;

- numerous teachers living in the Suburban High community which naturally allows for contact with parents and students outside of the school building. These encounters, according to teachers, allow for informal situations in which to further get to know parents and students. Additionally, it "humanizes" the image parents and students have of teachers, allowing for more personal connections than those established in school.

> "It's nice for the kids to see that teachers don't just sit with red pens gripped in their hands and stern looks on their faces. It's nice for them to see that, yes I do eat food, and drink coke, and buy groceries . . . . And so living around here has actually humanized me in the eyes of many of my students and parents . . . . And taking that a step further I have two children who have been through [this particular school system], and one has already finished college. And when I'm talking to parents and they are wringing their hands `What can I do, Johnny does not think that his grades are important now, and he wants to go to William and Mary, or Virginia Tech or James Madison, and what can I do?' Then I can draw on my own personal experiences." (Teacher Q6)

> "A lot of my parental conferences are in the aisles at [name of local grocery store]. I always see and we stop and chat. Or at ball games, at a lot of extracurricular things here at school . . . . I think it is an advantage. When I first started teaching I thought `Do I really want to live anywhere near the school?' But I think it's an advantage because I see them at other places, and sometimes you can converse with them about other things than about their children. Then it makes it easier to talk about their children." (Teacher R1)

It should also be mentioned, though, that living in the community served by Suburban High poses a challenge to teachers, namely that they may have to protect their privacy, and set limits as to what are appropriate topics of private conversation with parents.

> "I'm no different here [at school] than I am at their (parents') home at a party on Saturday nights. And they know that. I don't talk about what goes on in my classroom . . . . A lot of time they'll say `have you heard dadada,' and then they'll say, `oh, we know, you're not going to talk about it.' And so they never push me or question or try to trick me into giving them information." (Teacher S5)
>
> "I'm not the only teacher who lives around here. For many of us at Suburban High we are sometimes put into awkward situations because of that. We get phone calls at home from parents of students we don't teach, you know, what do you think about this, or what do you know about this, or what can you tell me. So that's a situation that I really did not have to deal with until I transferred here." (Teacher Q5)

- a school policy which requires all new students, i.e. rising eighth graders, and their parents to attend an orientation during the summer. This orientation serves to get students and parents acquainted with the school, its rules and expectations. Parents are required to sign a handbook informing them about the regulations at Suburban High.

Implications: Numerous factors enable generally positively perceived parent involvement at Suburban High. Some of those are conditions largely beyond the control of individual teachers (for instance, "peer pressure" among parents to get involved in school), others consist of conscious efforts by faculty and staff to encourage parent involvement. It is recommended that the Suburban High community of educators and parents consciously build upon "what works," by learning from each other, and by applying good ideas and best practices beyond the realm of where they are already used.

BARRIERS

Although--as pointed out above--parent involvement is generally perceived as high by educators and parents alike, the data contains indications that not all parents are involved to the

same degree. Both teachers and parents identify numerous barriers to parent involvement.

CULTURAL BARRIERS

It appears that certain groups of parents are marginalized at Suburban High. Reasons for that marginalization are diverse; they may be related to the educational background of parents, class, race, or gender, to name only some of the factors that surfaced in this study.

- class, race and parents' educational background: involved parents were generally described by teachers as "upper echelon parents," or "professional parents, pushing their children." Parents classified as less or not at all involved were characterized as "lower white collar or blue collar parents," or "those who may be a little less educated." Along those same lines, involved parents were described as "parents of kids who are active in school, upper level kids, fast level kids," whereas uninvolved parents were seen as "parents of lower level kids." An exception may be those parents of "upper level kids" who were described by educators as being reticent because they are "a little less educated . . . and accept the fact that, well, the school and the teacher are possibly right, and don't push them." (Teacher R2).

From a parent perspective, parents' lack of higher education (rather the exception than the rule at Suburban High) may also lead to communication barriers between parents and school personnel. One set of parents who, in their words "just attended community colleges" felt overwhelmed and not adequately supported by Suburban High staff in making college choices for their children.

It was mentioned that parents who are either non-Caucasian or socio-economically not as high as the majority of Suburban High parents perceive barriers to visible school involvement.

One teacher explained:

> "I think that those kids who are Asian in background have a whole lot easier time than those who are African-American students. Just because there are fewer African Americans than Asians. They've had to blend in for so long, as teenagers they don't want to blend in anymore . . . . And even the children who are lower socio-economic . . . they say, you know my parents don't buy me the following things. I think those parents we hear from the least. Even though they are probably, or I would hope they are just as active in their child's education." (Teacher V5)

A (Caucasian) parent who is highly involved in school affairs mentioned class and race as barriers to visible school involvement as well. According to parent B,

> "We have had a hard time getting Asian-American people involved, mainly because . . . parents still speak their own language at home and have a communication gap. We don't even have any [language] classes out here . . . . And I know we encompass some areas that probably aren't as affluent as others, so it probably keeps parents from being involved too, because they feel like they are not educated enough or they don't live in as big a house as they should to be involved." (Parent B7)

This particular parent mentioned that other schools conduct PTA meetings in the community, in different neighborhoods which might make parents with different backgrounds more comfortable participating.

- student culture: besides class and educational background of parents, cultural barriers to parental involvement at Suburban High are at times also based on students' feelings of alienation from a dominant school culture. Parents reported that the school's overly strong focus on certain activities, especially athletics, leads to keeping non-athletic students (and thus possibly their parents) "out".

  > "I think the school is really concerned with sports. My children are not involved in sports . . . . And I think because my children are quiet and don't give them any problems . . . . I think they were just sort of shoved aside." (Parent F3)

Yet, another cultural barrier surfacing in this study pertains to gender. Most involvement is

carried out by mothers, and parental involvement in school is frequently seen as a "mother's job." This, however, has ramifications for fathers who want to be, or are, intimately involved in their children's education, as the following quote illustrates:

> "When women get into their own little world and do their own little thing, and they leave me out . . . I have gone over and all the women . . . are sitting at one table, and I was never asked to join them. That is their little world, and I think it is the gender thing. It's different. I think women feel threatened by men in that type of role." (Parent B5)

ATTITUDINAL BARRIERS

Attitudes may pose barriers to parental involvement in two different ways. For one, Suburban High educators reported "attitude problems" of parents who are perceived as uninvolved. They view parents as holding the attitude that education is the school's job and the sole obligation of the teachers.

> "Some parents feel that when the child comes in that door from the bus ramp, what we do here is for us to decide, and they don't want to have anything to do with it. And they figure `my teachers taught me and so my children's teachers will teach them'." (Teacher Q2)

Some parents, according to teachers, are preoccupied with career considerations, even "looks," and their social life. They are seen as looking for excuses not to get involved in order to "just turn their back on it" or expect for children to neatly fit into their busy lives, as the following quotes illustrate:

> "They're just happy that their child is making a `C' and they can go on with their life." (Teacher T3)

> "Every once in a while we have a kid who seems to fail constantly. And then we hear how they just got a new car, or they're getting ready to go on a two week vacation, and they're going to pull the kid out of school . . . . And most of the time that will be a parent who, this is my life, and you work around my life. And you're not going to change too many parents like that . . . . It's kind of a self-centered life, and the children just happen to fit into this adult world." (Teacher S3)

Yet, other attitudinal reasons given by teachers as to why some parents do not get involved in school were that they "don't know what to do, they've had enough, this kid is seventeen or eighteen years old, when are they going to straighten out their own lives?" (Teacher V3). One teacher reported that uninvolvement seems to occur especially among parents of male students:

> "And usually the problem is the male with maturity problems. And I think parents are just elated that the child is getting a `C' because I think the problem is that it is probably such a battle at home to get that person to do more homework, it's not worth a war fighting for the parents." (Teacher T3)

From the parent perspective 16- and 17-year-old students do not allow for much parent impact: "It just doesn't seem worth the effort." (Parent E4)

More data on "uninvolved parents" would need to be collected in order to adequately assess the educators' claim that parental attitudes constitute a barrier to parental involvement. What these quotes demonstrate, however, is that teachers at Suburban High seem to develop negat ive attitudes toward parents who are perceived as uninvolved. These attitudes constitute additional barriers to parental involvement.

Parents at Suburban High indeed reported how teacher attitudes toward them constitute a barrier to their involvement in school. The interesting aspect here is, however, that parents saw other parents as responsible for provoking adverse reactions from Suburban educators. According to interviewees, the so called "overinvolvement" of selected parents not only alienates other parents but also causes teachers to display a rather "cool, and professional" attitude toward parents in general, whether they in fact are "overinvolved" or not:

> "All those PTA meetings, and you feel like, I've never seen a bigger group of snobs in all my life. And they do control the teachers, and they make plans for the teachers . . . . I think it's a handful of the super rich . . . that get really, really, really involved . . . . And they try to tell the teachers because they're so rich, and they're so smart, they try to

> tell the teachers, who feel they're smart, how to handle their business, and how to handle their kids, and all this other stuff. It's very confusing for both parties, I'm sure . . . . It's very confrontational. You just walk in, and I feel intimidated immediately. Just by their, you know, the school. And I thought the South was supposed to be friendly . . . . As long as this area is so wealthy, like I said, the rich trying to control the teachers. I kind of feel sorry for the teachers, and at the same time I'm still kind of pissed off at the teachers for the way they treated my kids in the past. But, I understand why they take that position because they're used to dealing with these rich [. . .] over there. And then I go in, Joe Schmo, middle of the road type of person. They're ready for a fight." (Parent C7/8/11)

This particular participant described how teachers' attitudes toward parents make it particularly difficult to openly communicate in times of crisis or disagreement between parents and educators. Other parents' criticisms dealt with teachers not taking the time to give information, not taking parents seriously, administrators brushing parents off, "playing politics, being wishy washy," not having the "backbone" or skills to run a school.

> "And so I didn't feel comfortable enough to go to the school because of these past experiences and the way they had treated me. I didn't feel like I would get any satisfaction . . . . I didn't feel like I could talk . . . . And there are some good teachers there, there are some excellent teachers. But there are some teachers that just really don't care. And they were not positive, they did not respond to how we presented ourselves." (Parent F8)

One teacher speculated, furthermore, that parents might not feel invited or welcome to participate in school and rather perceive the school as:

> ". . . sacred territory, like parents are over here, schools here, and a wall exists, and you only deal with it on certain levels." (Teacher V5)

A parent indeed voiced her frustration with what she called educators who are very close knit, and who--in times of disagreement--had demonstrated to her that they would "stick up for that one teacher, like I didn't have a leg to stand on . . . . And I came out feeling kind of defeated." (Parent C3)

Parents might also, according to teachers, fear negative ramifications for their children if

they get too involved in school. A parent indeed reported how her son had pleaded with her not to interfere in a certain matter for fear of negative consequences.

> "If I made too much of a stink then my son was saying, please don't do this, I've got to go to school." (Parent C3)

RESOURCE BARRIERS

Lack of resources constitute barriers in various ways:

- time constraints: lack of time was named frequently as an explanation for parents to being involved in school. This could be due to both parents working outside of the home, single parenthood, or parents "getting flooded" with a child's activities outside of school. "They're too busy, I think they're too busy." (Teacher T2). Parents validated this finding. They talked about their hesitations to attend school related meetings after long hours of work, of time being a "biggie."

COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

The data revealed that there is room for improvement of parent-teacher communication. The following complaints were made by teachers: Staff is overwhelmed handling phone calls, PTA teacher night takes place too late into the school year. Parents also complained about poor communication with the school. They claimed that the school--with the exception of individual teachers--never initiated any type of communication, hardly asked parents or students to get involved. One parent talked about his/her child's alienation from and difficulties with school which may--among other things--lead to children not communicating with their parents about school, not passing on information, etc.

> "X is the sort of kid that doesn't show you anything. If I had to depend on her for information, I wouldn't know. She is not really involved. In fact, I would say she is

alienated at this point." (Parent D2)

School-home communication was described as insufficient, especially in crisis situations, i.e. a student skipping school without the parents' knowledge.

> "The one call that I had a while ago from her teachers told me that X had 68 absences, and I was not aware of that, so at some point I think they need to have a system where they generate a letter." (Parent D3)

This particular parent admitted that it was possible that the child had interfered and deliberately withheld messages. And yet, according to the parents, they had not been reached by phone or other media, and had not been informed about the scope of their child's attendance problems.

COMMUNITY FRACTIONS

Parents at Suburban High struggle with the makeup of the Suburban community which is described as transient, fractured, and anonymous, as the following parents observed:

> "When I drive up here and pick up my son, or if I go up there to do things there would be a whole row of parents picking up their children. If you go to another high school, most of the time, the parents are all out of the car, talking, chatting. Here it's almost like Russia, had divided into neighborhoods. . . . I just wished Suburban High was more of a community."

> "So when we came down here it was like a culture shock. Because I knew no one, I still know no one. . . . And I've lived here for eight years, and I still don't know anybody. . . . Everybody here is so transient. There are not very many original [name of town's inhabitants] in this area." (Parent C1)

Parents perceive other parents as being exclusive, and--at least in the past--having seized influence over certain school related groups without inviting outsiders, working through networks and cliques of their own.

> "One group ran the whole show . . . [When it came to filling leadership positions of parent organizations] somebody will pick their next door neighbor . . . or their sister-in-law, almost like incest . . . ." (B8)

Strong feelings among parents about Suburban High parents in general include the sense that money and status serve to divide the community, leading to prejudice and stratification.

> "I do see an attitude that if you are either not somebody or you live in a certain area, that you are not as good. You really do see that among parents. . . . It seems like the parents look at people like that, who you are and where you went to school." (Parent B8, 9)

> "I think it goes back to the money thing. People are so concerned about how they look, how they are perceived, it's a shame, because I don't think it's going to be possible to get that kind of homey network kind of thing going." (Parent C11)

> "There's a lot of social status at Suburban High. . . . It's what you have, it's money, . . . and if you weren't in their little social circle, you. . . . And I don't feel comfortable going to the school . . . it's back to the same old social status." (Parents F, G 11-15)

INSTITUTIONAL/ORGANIZATIONAL BARRIERS

Some parents reported not feeling at ease when approaching/visiting the school. They did not blame individual educators for that barrier but rather structural factors, the size of the school and a general atmosphere existent at Suburban High:

> "It is so big and so traditional." (Parent D7)

> "I still feel that even though I'm welcome, it just may be my paranoia, but when I go to Suburban High I always stop at the secretary and I say Hi . . ., rather than going right in there. . . . There is something about Suburban High. . . . I call somebody and I will say `Hi, this is X, sorry to bother you, but can you give my son Y a message,' instead of just saying `give Y a message.' I always apologize before I do anything. They have always said `call us, we will look out for anything.' I think it's just me. But the way Suburban High is laid out, it would be a very hard school to feel like you could just walk somewhere. . . ." (Parent B10)

> "I kind of liked the small school atmosphere there [at the student's former school]. . . . I knew all the teachers, they knew my kids. I knew their kids, and it was nice." (Parent D1)

Parent involvement in school governance is another issue of contention which--if not clarified between parents and educators--constitutes a barrier to parental involvement in school. As

mentioned earlier, some parents have an understanding of parent involvement that goes beyond supporting school activities and teachers. Rather, it includes issues of school governance, policies, curriculum questions, teacher hiring, firing, and evaluation; parents councils, in other words: having a strong voice in all areas of school decision making. Social, cultural, and institutional barriers are seen as reasons why this type of involvement does not take place at Suburban High, or in the state public schools in general.

> "I think the barriers are social and cultural, and there is no tradition of citizen involvement in the schools in [the state], and there is no encouragement of it." (Parent A2)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Generally speaking, Suburban High is a school with plenty of resources, parents being one of them. The contact between parents and educators generally is described as intense, which provides the potential for a productive school-home partnership. A high degree of parent involvement in school, as was shown above, does not necessarily mean absence of conflict. Neither does it mean that all participants perceive the nature of the school-home relationship to be productive or positive. In order to use conflicts productively, it is recommended that efforts be made to bring these conflicts out into the open. This seems like a sensible first step in improving--if not the degree--the nature of the home-school relationships. For this purpose, educators, parents, policy makers in general, and the Suburban High community in particular are invited to consider the following recommendations:

1. Open dialogue: Parents and educators at Suburban High would probably benefit from efforts to initiate dialogues about the type of parent-school relations they would find most desirable. As this study has shown, different understandings concerning the role and professional sphere of educators, as well as differing interpretations of what constitutes "good" parent involvement exist among members of the Suburban High community. As long as these issues are not addressed, teachers may continue to feel pressured and "smothered," whereas parents may continue to feel as if their "true" voice and substantial influence on school matters are not welcome. Additionally, teachers may continue to be preoccupied with highly visible and vocal parents, neglecting the needs of those parents who are barely visible and would profit from being encouraged to get involved in school.

An open dialogue should also take place among parents and in those organizations organized by or representing parents, to help overcome divisions within the parent community. Problematic issues that surfaced in this research are related to gender (men perceiving parent involvement as the women's domain feeling discouraged from becoming active in school) and "cliquish" behavior on the part of those parents who are well established in school organizations.

2. Building upon existing strengths: Existing enablers of school-parent relationship should be recognized and build upon. Visible parent involvement in school activities, for instance, is not only extraordinarily high at Suburban High, it is also generally recognized and appreciated as important and helpful to educators and students. Parents and educators who are in contact through parent support of school activities (for instance, the PTA) could initiate a dialogue about how to deal with some of the problems described in this report (i.e. how to deal with student and teacher pressure, how to invite those parents who are not visibly involved in school, etc.)

Other enablers existing at Suburban High (such as specific programs, projects, policies, traditions, and individual teacher/staff efforts/techniques) should be supported, enhanced, and used as models for the improvement of school-parent relationships.

3. Grievance procedure: A formal grievance procedure for parents ought to be established. Teachers and staff at times seem overwhelmed by individual confrontations with parents. An official grievance procedure (i.e. a teacher/parent/student/staff/committee dealing with written complaints, suggestions, recommendations, and questions on a regular basis) may eliminate the constant pressure some teachers experience as well as the concern about exaggerated advocacy on the part of parents who are overly concerned about grades and even willing to resort

to morally questionable tactics for the benefit of their children. A grievance procedure would, at the same time, provide parents with the opportunity to make their voices heard.

4. Acceptance of silent parent involvement: Educators across the board should recognize that parent involvement in school can and does take many different forms. This realization can positively impact teachers' attitudes toward those parents who are hardly ever visible in the school building, as well as teacher relationships with the children of presumably uninvolved parents.

5. Diversification: Both parents and educators at Suburban High lament the fact that Suburban students are frequently overprotected and exposed to a socially and culturally fairly homogeneous life style and outlook. Diversification in regard to class, race, and culture is virtually non-existent at Suburban High. For the benefit of the students as well as the community at large it is advisable that more efforts be made to increase diversity at Suburban High, to consciously encourage those students and parents who are minority groups (Asian- American, African-American, lower socio-economic class) to actively participate in life at Suburban High. A generally more open attitude toward differences and

diversity among the Suburban High community would ameliorate the barriers of those members of the community who currently perceive themselves not to be part of the "mainstream," as being left out, and looked down upon. Although one might argue that this is "not the school's problem," research has shown that a school can contribute significantly to the diversity of educational experiences and thus level of tolerance among its students and thus the community at large.

Being more sensitive toward issues of diversity also entails that school personnel make

efforts to respond to needs of minority parents. This group encompasses parents with a relatively limited formal education, limited financial means, as well as minorities in terms of race and culture. It should not, to name just two examples, be assumed that all parents are familiar with college selection and entrance procedures, or able to fluently communicate using the English language.

6. Eliminating communication barriers: Communication between the school and parents could be improved in various ways.

- using communications technology: hot lines and help lines, automated calling, teachers' voice mail and voice messaging that are left in "mail boxes" and accessible 14 hours a day should substitute an overburdened central phone system.
- crisis communication should be intensified: absences, academic problems, etc. should be communicated according to a standardized, predictable, regular, and efficient system.
- while teachers and parents generally interact frequently at Suburban High, certain essentially important issues seem to be taboo (student abuse of alcohol and drugs, sexual [mis]conduct, inappropriate degrees of pressure on students, etc.). Efforts ought to be made by the school as well as parent-teacher organizations to bring these issues out into the open and to collaboratively seek strategies to unearth their causes and to help the students affected.

It is important to note that in the Suburban High case the improvement of communication does not just entail sending more messages reliably back and forth between home and school. As was explained above, it also means clarifying understandings and tackling taboo issues currently

neglected. To improve communication, then, goes beyond finding new communication media to opening a dialogue about problems plaguing the Suburban High community.

7. Responding to parents' time constraints: Suburban High serves many families with both parents working outside of the home and/or being involved in strenuous and time consuming careers. It is suggested that the school respond innovatively to these barriers to parent involvement.

Examples are:

- using communication technology (as mentioned above) which allows teachers to daily send out messages that can easily be received without parents having to leave their home or work.
- introducing school-home notes (daily or weekly notes send home by teachers, see (Kelley, 1990). If these notes (or communication folders) are sent on a regular and predictable basis, i.e. every day or every Tuesday, or every other Monday, etc. parents and teachers can make students accountable for delivering the messages.
- develop procedures to take advantage of "drop-off" and "pick-up" times for parents who provide transportation. Notes and short messages are easily passed on during these times. A "parent mailbox" could be made available in close range to the parking spaces enabling parents to quickly pick up information.
- displaying and disseminating information for parents at one central place (for instance, the parent meeting space), which allows parents to pick up information at their convenience.

8. Parent education and parent support groups: In order to change the attitude that education is "the school's job," parents should be informed (at meetings, "Back-to-school-night," newcomer orientation, through newsletters, etc.) about the positive correlation between parent involvement in school and students' academic achievement. Along the same lines, parent support groups should be organized as a source of peer counseling and expert advice in order to help parents deal with parenting problems that impede involvement in school.

9. Teacher and staff education: the school personnel's continuing education (courses at Schools of Education, professional development activities, workshops, seminars, etc.) should include information about home-school relations and how to understand and encourage parent involvement. These educational activities not only offer concrete suggestions as to how to foster parent involvement, but also help remind educators of the importance of parent involvement of older, i.e. high school, students.

10. Provision of a parent meeting space: parents ought to be provided with an informal meeting space. This space (preferably room) could provide a comfortable waiting zone, a place to meet and to pass on or receive information, etc. This provision seems especially important in a community like the one served by Suburban High which is described as fragmented, transient, and anonymous. Providing a parent meeting space, furthermore, sends an important signal to the community, welcoming parents' presence in the school building.

CASE 2: PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AT CITY HIGH SCHOOL

In March, the PTSA (Parent-Teacher-Student-Association) of City High School organized the annual meeting dedicated to distributing academic awards to students. The meeting was scheduled to begin at 7:30 in the School's auditorium. At this time approximately 15 people were present. People continued to arrive. Attendance rose to approximately 80 people by 7:45 p.m. when the point of greatest attendance was reached. 15-20 of those present were teachers/staff members, some 20 were young children brought by their parents, and roughly 25 were students. At no point were there more than 20 parents present, all of who appeared to be parents of students who received awards. Altogether some 200 awards were given. Some students received more than one award. Of the approximately 150 students who were honored, 25 were present to receive their awards.

A parent's comment days after the event:

> *"Two out of your three straight A students did not show up. If you can't even get your top students there, who are you going to get?" (X1)*

SETTING AND DATA COLLECTION

City High School (pseudonym) is located near the downtown area on the outskirts of a community that used to be an economically significant and socially vital part of the metropolitan area, but is currently characterized primarily by poverty, unemployment, and high crime rates. The school serves its immediate neighborhood which includes seven housing projects as well as low income communities 5 to 10 miles away. The student population of approximately 800 is 98 percent African American, 1 percent Caucasian, and 1 percent Hispanic. The school has 60 faculty members; 70% are African-American; 30% Caucasian.

City High faces all of the typical problems plaguing today's American inner-city public schools: student absenteeism and dropout, general community deterioration, violence, and all the other seemingly inevitable effects of poverty, lack of opportunity, and racial discrimination.

The researchers surveyed 28 City High teachers and conducted a total of 9 in-depth, open-ended interviews with teachers and staff, 1 interview with a former staff member, one interview with a principal serving a similar student population, one interview with a student, and 9 interviews with parents (3 of which were conducted by phone). Parent interviews included those who had been nominated by teachers as "involved" and "uninvolved" parents.

FINDINGS

DEGREE OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

The findings portrayed in this section are based primarily on the results of a written survey handed to faculty and staff. Occasionally, excerpts of interviews with teachers/staff and parents are used to illustrate/contrast a point. Both the survey and interviews with faculty and staff indicated that participants generally rated the level of parent involvement--of any kind--as low or very low at City High. The survey demonstrated that 15 out of 28 teachers/staff members rated parent involvement as low, 9 as very low, and 4 as moderate.

The following interview quotes illustrate the point:

> "Parent involvement is insufficient. . . . We just don't see parents enough, and it is difficult to get parents in, it is difficult to get parents involved. . . . The kind of problem we have had in terms of parental involvement would be lack of involvement. That is just a major thing." (Staff A1/4)

> "I don't see a lot of parent involvement. The few I do see are the same all the time." (Teacher B1)

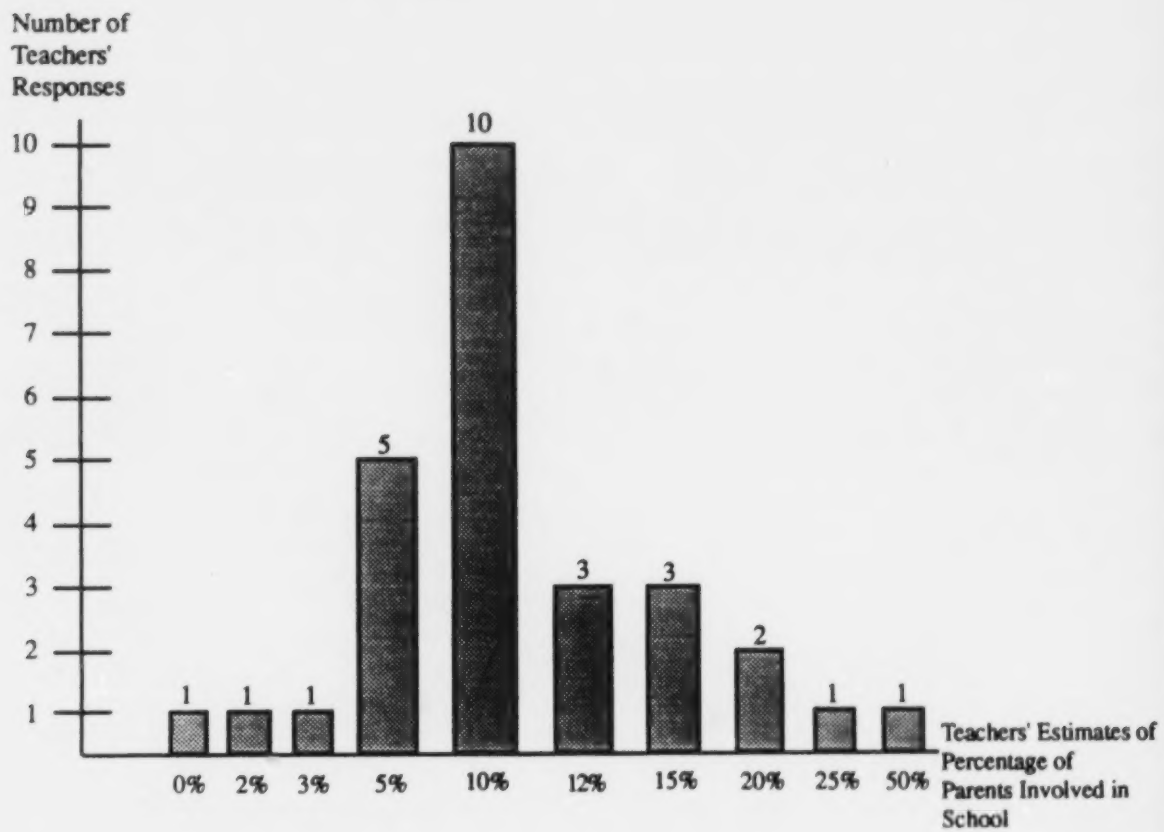
"The population we have is 900, I think, maybe a little more . . . and you look and maybe you see 100 parents at any one of those given activities. To me that speaks poorly. (Teacher C2)

"The vast majority of parents are not involved." (Staff F1) Parents who were nominated as "involved" estimated parent involvement generally to be low ("I would say it's low, I would say 30% is good." Parent X8).

When asked to estimate the percentage of parents involved in school the mode (most frequently occurring number)--according to teachers and staff members--was 10 (11 teachers estimated 10% of the parents were involved). Only one participant estimated that more than 25% of parents are involved in school at City High; the other 27 gave estimates between 0 and 25%. The following table demonstrates the distribution of teachers' estimates of parental involvement at City High, or--put differently--it shows how many teachers estimated a certain percentage of parents being involved in school:

City High School

Teachers' Estimates of Percentage of Parents Involved in School



Most teachers/staff members, additionally, indicated in their survey responses that they view the quality of parent involvement at City High as moderate or poor (1 teacher found the quality of parent involvement to be very good, 4 good, 8 moderate, 11 poor, and 3 very poor, 1 participant did not respond). In response to the question as to why participants think parental involvement is the way they see it at City High, 27 participants responded enumerating reasons most of which pertain to parents' social conditions and attitudes toward education (see Appendix C for details).

In summary, teachers and staff members at City High School generally rate the level of parental involvement as low or very low at their school, estimating that no more than 25% of parents are involved. The quality of involvement is mostly seen as moderate or poor, and the reasons that are given for this situation pertain mostly to parents' socio-economic status or other aspects of the students'family's, community's situation. While a total number of 27 participants responded, only 2 comments referred to barriers to parental involvement that are generated and/or perpetuated by the school (parents feeling intimidated by school personnel; no real effort being made by the school to get parents involved). To phrase it differently, school personnel generally views parents--their socio-economic/marital situations, attitudes, etc.)--as responsible for low involvement in school.

TYPES OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

While the survey data provides a quantitative look at estimates of the extent of parent involvement at City High, in-depth interviews allow to explore the nature and qualitative elements of parent involvement in more detail. What types of parent involvement are prevalent at Suburban High--according to both teachers/staff and parents--who is involved, who is not involved, what

barriers exist, what efforts are made to overcome those barriers? These questions are explored in the following sections.

Although participants of this study perceive parental involvement at City High as low, they identified several conditions under which at least some parent involvement can be accomplished:

- when parents are requested or even required to come (conferences about an individual child; crisis communication; picking up report cards). The strongest area of parent involvement, according to one teacher, is related to student suspension: "Then it is required that the parents bring them back." (Teacher C3)
- at events that directly relate to or involve their children (initiation into honors societies, graduation, performances, athletic events); these events are often special rather than year-round occurrences.
- at events of obvious relevance to their or their children's lives (example: financial aid workshop).[2]

Furthermore, a small group of parents (an estimated number of 30-50 parents) is visibly involved supporting school activities. They are active in the PTSA or parent boosters supporting special projects; they attend sporting events, man the concession stands, support clubs, chaperon activities, etc. Some parents are also described by teachers/staff as being supportive and involved academically:

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[2] See also section on enablers of parental involvement of City High.
with the children" (Parent U2), and helping out in case the school needs a hand organizing special events.

> "Some do an excellent job. I think if you look at it throughout any school, there are always going to be some parents who are still parents and really do the job that parents should be doing. They contact the teachers. They ask for homework. They are well aware of when report cards are out. They are well aware of parent conferences. They are well aware at the beginning of the school year of teachers who teach their sons and daughters. You know, we have some of those here at City High." (Teacher D2)

According to teacher E., this academically oriented type of parent involvement includes parents keeping an open line of communication, "being there at home and assisting their children through completion of homework, projects, things of that sort." (Teacher E3) From a parent's perspective this type of parent involvement was described as being an active listener, asking questions and giving advice if requested, stepping in and contacting the school if a problem arises, as well as attending PTSA meetings and parent-teacher conferences, talking with teachers, the guidance department and students, visiting the school in order to "get a feel of what is going on

One set of parents who reported considerable dissatisfaction with City High School in general and who do not seem visibly active or involved in school, nevertheless described what they call "tough love" at home which is intended to keep their children focused on school. They described that their children were "wanted" children and how they--as parents--have stayed together providing a stable family. According to them, their children cannot appeal to their parents' guilt in order to justify school failure. Rather, they have to abide by the rules set in their home, and doing their best in school is one of them.

> "That's why [the children] do as well as they do because we're right there, on their cases to see what they're doing." (Mother T17)

> "We won't take anything . . . you're not going to just come here and do nothing, I'm not going to send you to school and you aren't going to do anything but squat. No way. . . . My kids can't use guilt on me. . . . I don't have to deal with guilt.

> [The daughter] was planned, was wanted. . . . When you come back to your little environment with your mother and father and not beating each other up, I'm not coming home drunk, I'm bringing my money home, so that's something different. . . . We don't have a problem at home." (Father T17)
>
> "Tough love, we call it tough love." (Mother T17)

IMPLICATIONS: Although parent involvement at City High School was characterized as low by participants in this study, it should not go unmentioned that a minority of parents are actively engaged and visible in school. Along the same lines, parents--albeit probably a minority of parents--are silently involved in school, creating a supportive home environment conducive to their children's academic achievement. These findings are important in various ways. For one, it becomes clear that City High educators can make use of and build upon a core of involved parents in their efforts to increase and enhance all kinds of parental involvement in school. Secondly, these parents demonstrate to a wider community that it is obviously possible to be involved in school even if numerous barriers seem to exist at City High (compare section on "Barriers to parental involvement at City High"). They consequently invite the educational community and parents alike to learn from their examples of resilience. It is suggested that further research be done focusing exclusively on "resilient" parents who are intimately involved in school against all odds.

WHAT WORKS: ENABLERS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Both school personnel and parents at City High named several factors that encourage parental involvement at school. The following points were mentioned by teachers/staff:

1. organizing events of value to parents: according to participants parents need to value an event in order to attend. They either attend because:

- the event is seen as crucial to their children's academic success (first student-parent meeting);
- the event impacts specifically on their or their children's lives (financial aid workshops, presentation on testing, special programs for talented children, i.e. the AVID program, etc.)

> "We have a new program called AVID--advancement via individual determination. It is for minority youth who have average and above average ability in math. . . . The first meeting we had 40% of the parents who received letters to come. That was amazing, that was wonderful. . . . The parents will come because they realize we say `hey, your child is special, this is something special for your child'. . . . They come. It has to be something specifically designed to treat their children." (Staff G1)

- the event involves the parents' child, for instance featuring his/her talents, honoring him/her, etc.
- the students want their parents to attend either because they are directly involved in the event or given incentives to attract parents (examples: band performing at PTSA meetings).
- incentives are provided for parents to attend (i.e. free dinners with PTSA meetings, door prizes, or coupling a meeting with a student performance.)

2. requiring parents to come: teachers reported that parents tend to come if they are required to, for instance, pick up their child's report card. Such requirement "gets parents in the door" and provides the basis for relatively well attended parent-teacher conferences.

3. appropriate scheduling: since many parents work jobs that do not easily allow them to take off in order to come to school, events need to be scheduled sensibly. Several factors impact scheduling, however; parents work different shifts, some may not be able to take

off during the day, others may not be able to take off at night. Many parents live relatively far away and do not have transportation. As one respondent pointed out, parents are reluctant to come back to school once they are home after a day's work. In order to deal with these problems, one teacher reported that she offers telephone conferences as a possible alternative to in-house parent-teacher conferences. Split-shifts on parent-conference day was also mentioned as a possible way to respond to the problem (offering conferences at night and in the morning).

4. taking a holistic approach, involving students and parents in projects: one participant recalled how City High had been able to generate parent interest in the school and involvement by organizing a Shakespeare Festival, distributing t-shirts featuring the slogan "City High Can Do Shakespeare," and rallying teachers, staff, students, and parents around a one week-long, thematically focused, special event. Along the same lines, another participant described how parents are willing to get involved in school when they feel that their special talents are needed in order to make something happen. She is apparently successful in convincing parents that their presence and support with special projects is essential. According to her, these joint activities not only get parents involved in school but also foster family togetherness.

5. Establishing contact with community organizations, churches, etc., making home visits (home visits--no longer a practice at City High--were mentioned by one teacheras having been an enabler of parent involvement in the past). Furthermore, one former staff member emphasized the importance of staying in touch with the communities served by City High, visiting church services, and providing parents with direct and positive feedback:

> "I have been to [name of housing project] to any number of church functions and whatever to just see the children, you know, and it means a lot. . . . I've been there to funerals with children whose parents or other family members have passed,

churches of all denominations." (Former Staff H13)

> "I was trying to get them [parents] to make sure that their minds were not closed because the school looked at them differently because they came from [name of housing project], I told them `some of the best students we had during the time I was at City High came from [name of housing project].'" (Former Staff H15)

After leaving City High, the participant quoted above (H) continued to work with parent communities similar to the ones served by City High. She is convinced that numerous avenues--churches, community organizations, extended families, other agencies working with a community--exist that City High could use in order to "get to the parents" if parents do not get to the school.

> "I wasn't getting the parents to the school. I had to go to them. I also found that, particularly in the housing projects, they have a structured organization, a community organization as such, that they will bring the parents to you. And they did. Another source--and we did this a little when I was at City High, but not to a large degree--I think this would be an excellent time to revisit, and that is utilize the churches. Before I left City High, the ministers of the area were talking about forming a partnership with the school. That did occur after I left. To what extent it has been used I don't know. . . . You'll have people who'll say `Well, these children don't go to church, or their parents don't go to church.' That may be, but I don't happen to agree with them. Their grandparents are there, so, you know, you have to use every avenue, and you cannot wait for the one that'll bring you 100 percent results, because it does not exist. But you use all the various avenues. I do think the community structure in the housing projects is valuable. I was not aware that they have employees in the structure, in the organization, in the housing projects, that work on some of the very same issues that the school is working on. You can get so much by working together, you know." (Former Staff H9)

6. Continuous communication with parents, especially communication that is positive in nature: one teacher pointed out that it enables parent-school relations if teachers communicate regularly with parents, introducing themselves at the beginning of the year, sending out notes, informing parents of their children's positive developments (i.e. avoiding strictly crisis oriented communication).

7. A generally welcoming atmosphere toward parents: examples include providing a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere on parent-teacher conference day, welcoming parents even though they may have appeared outside of scheduled meeting times. The principal's attitude and behavior toward parents was also named as one enabling factor here.

8. Making special efforts to inform parents about extraordinary events, example: sending letters to parents of those students who are required to take the Literacy Passport Test, explaining nature and purpose of the test as well as days of administration; using the school's marque and flyers to advertise special events, etc.

Enablers named by parents

Although the tenor of parent comments about City High in general, and its relationship with parents in particular, was mostly critical,[3] some parents mentioned positive factors enabling parent involvement:

1. school personnel's open and encouraging attitude toward parents:

> "I find the school to be very open, they seem to be very encouraging, I don't find any barriers [to parent involvement] whatsoever." (Parent W1)
>
> "City High is a school where teachers try to work with students." (Parent S1) guidance department and students, visiting the school in order to "get a feel of what is going on"The teachers that I have met have had very open attitudes toward parents. . . . My experience has been very positive. They don't need to call me for anything other than to say `your kid did something good today'. I have gotten those phone calls. The teachers are always very receptive if I have a question or concern. Everybody has been more than willing to sit down and discuss it.'" (Parent V3)

2. special efforts made by teachers/staff

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3 Reminder: the nature of theis study, however, does not allow this finding to be generalized to the entire City High School population.

"I think the parent-teacher conferences come regularly, and you are always encouraged to have parent-teacher conferences, and you are always encouraged if you have any questions during the nine weeks to please call. The guidance department is very active. They are on the phone calling, checking out things, making sure things are going well." (Parent V4)

> "At City High the school is working very hard trying to involve parents; they have cultural activities, plays, fairs. It's up to the parents whether or not they want to take advantage of it. There is a lot of room for improvement." (Parent S2)

It should be mentioned here that all parents quoted above were nominated by teachers/staff as "involved" parents who, in addition, have children who are doing well in school. Not all parents share this positive assessment of City High. Rather, most parents mainly commented on problems they experience with City High School.

One teacher observed those parents who are visibly involved in school are generally parents of students who are average or above average in terms of academic achievement; ". . . whereas you want to see the parents of the students who are failing, and they are not coming here, not at guidance department and students, visiting the school in order to "get a feel of what is going on all." (Teacher I1)

Although teachers and staff report numerous efforts to encourage parental involvement (contacting parents by phone and letter, requiring them to sign homework assignments, sending out flyers, organizing special events, etc.) numerous barriers to parental involvement exist at City High.

Both the teachers' and parents' perspectives concerning barriers to parental involvement are portrayed in the following section.

BARRIERS

Note: Data collection for this project, generally, was labor-intense but possible. Teachers

and staff members were eager to accommodate interviews despite their busy schedules, and several parents responded positively to the request of granting the researcher an interview. Yet, parents who had been nominated as "uninvolved" proved even almost impossible to reach. Phone numbers supplied by the school were incorrect, either outdated, cut off, or reached only extended family members rather than a parent. Numerous times a parent had agreed to grant an interview but eventually withdrew by not showing. Only two interviews could be conducted with parents who were nominated as "uninvolved." Other parents, however, who had been reached through referrals made by parents, participated in this study. Although they may not have been nominated as "uninvolved," they nevertheless were either not visibly involved in school, or--even if they were--provided information about barriers to parent involvement at City High.

Teachers and administrators mentioned the following barriers to parental involvement in school:

- transient community: parents move frequently and students transfer accordingly, which creates barriers to parent and student involvement in school. One participant called the City public school system a "revolving door;"
- parents' lack of transportation;
- parents working long hours and numerous jobs;
- parents struggling with spousal and substance abuse;
- lack of communication: parents were described as being inaccessible for the school; phone numbers are inaccurate, outdated, phones cut off, parents live in households without phones; messages/flyers are not delivered to the parents; parents live in unsafe communities which deters educators from making home

visits, etc. When asked about the possibility of making home visits, educators at City High replied:

"I think now we would all be a little hesitant about going out into the community. . . . I hate to say it but it is very bad, it's a little scary, so I don't know that we would want to do that. I would be very hesitant to go into some of the neighborhoods we serve." (Staff A5)

One teacher described how lack of information and lack of involvement connect in a vicious cycle:

"Their [parents'] own children try to keep them uniformed about what is going on, and so there is disconnection. They don't know what is going on, and it seems that anything we don't know about, there is that little bit of fear, there is a little bit of hesitancy, reluctance to get involved. And so because they don't know what's going on, then there is not a sense or feeling that they ought to be there. . . . They are just unaware, and the more unaware they are, the easier it is for them not to get involved." (Teacher E4/5)

- lack of information and motivation: one educator who is a former City High school student mentioned that many parents just do not know how to motivate their children, how to "push" them "to want to do better." She mentions that parents' lack of information about scholarships and other avenues that would assist them and their children keep them unmotivated to encourage their children to do their best academically.

"I don't think they [parents] know how to go about it, how to push them. . . . Just because you live in one area doesn't mean you have to settle for what your parents settled for or what the community settled for. You have to want more for yourself. If you need some backing, then your parents have to want more. I don't think some of the parents expect their children to go to college. They think it's a money thing. They think that `well, I'm not rich and I don't have a job, then my child cannot go to college and get an education,' whereas that is totally a false thing . . . because the money is out there for us, with grants, with minority grants, whatever. The parents don't know the money is there . . ., that there is a road to take to get your child in school." (Teacher I8/9)

- students' attitude: it was mentioned that students do not wish for their parents to

be involved in school:

> "At the high school level students do not want their parents on the scene too much because other students who are their peers will think that they are just little kids because every time we turn around your parents are here." (Teacher E4/5)

This explanation of lacking parental involvement, however, was questioned by other participants who pointed out that high school students--especially those who are successful--generally want their parents to be involved.

> "Kids go through puberty, and there is a period of time when they really can't get along with their parents anyway, so they don't want involvement. Then there is a period when the kids get back to being glad to have their parents involved. As students get close to completing high school, they get more comfortable with having their parents involved in school, especially if they are successful. It depends on the event, it depends upon the kid's level of success . . . but it also depends on the child's level of maturity. Middle school children really don't like their parents. . . . But with high school students it doesn't matter as much." (Staff G2)

> "I don't think kids are embarrassed having their parents participate. In my situation, I have two grown daughters. . . . And my daughters would say `mom, you gotta come to school to a meeting, you gotta do this, you gotta do that,' and I was involved . . . and they wanted me involved. I think most students want heir parents to come to school and be involved." (Teacher B4)

> "Some of the teachers will tell you it is true [that kids do not wish their parents to be involved] because some of the children don't. But those are the kids who are ashamed of what they are doing. . . . I worked with cheerleaders . . . they want you to know who their parents are. They want it. They don't get it." (Teacher C6)

A former student of City High remembers:

> "I always wanted my mother to come and participate, but she just never had the time. I don't think we are embarrassed. I think a lot of kids would want their parents involved, you may want to do better. Like maybe just come up to the game. If you come out to the game with your parent, then you may think, hey, I like school, I like for my school to win. I like feeling successful, then maybe I can do a little better, achieve more." (Teacher I4)

- teenage pregnancy which not only impacts the school life of the student but also

impacts her/his parenting skills and the future of the child:

"When that child becomes to be at the age of going to high school or whatever the case may be, that child cannot depend on the parent who does not know parenting skills because that 14-year-old never got a chance to complete high school." (Teacher B2)

"A lot of parents have not understood how important it is for them to be involved. . . . We have a lot of parents who are almost as young as the kids, and they are not thinking yet like an older parent such as myself would think in terms of my children. You have a lot of parents who are not involved because they are living their own life." (Teacher E3)

- lack of care for and/or control over their children: educators mentioned that parents presumably do not care enough about their children, do not have control over their children, or feel that they do not need--or do not have the power--to be involved any longer since their child has reached high school age and is "grown."

"It seems like they don't care. You call a parent to tell them their child has been out of school or misbehaving in class, their response is `well, he does the same thing at home, and I don't know what to do.' They have no control. . . . It just seems as if they want to get them out of the house in the morning, get them away from them for seven hours a day." (Teacher B1)

"I have had many parents who expressed this to me, especially about the boys. He is grown, he is a man, he is grown. About a 16-year-old-kid. You know, `I can't do anything about it, it's up to him now.' You know, that kind of thing. So I think there is a certain proportion of parents who feel really that once the kid is in high school, they don't need to be involved . . . particularly about male students, when they are 15, 16, 17 years old, there are some parents who just feel like they are men, and they don't need to be involved, and that they can't really have any control over the child. They don't have control, and it is impossible for them to gain that control." (Staff A2)

Teachers/staff at City High explained how students are directly affected by parents who do not or cannot assume their responsibilities as parents:

"Many kids don't stay after school because they have adult responsibilities." (Staff J1)

"I think we have a lot of single households. We have mothers with a lot of children, and they don't have any time to sit down and ask the students where they are having problems or try to help them or try to see if they can contact the teacher to help. Some parents put

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the responsibility on the child solely when they are not adults. They are being brought up as an adult, being able to take care of responsibility which they can't because they don't know what they should be doing. . . . A lot of students here have children and they miss a lot of school because of that. Again, the parents have to work, so they don't know the kids stay at home. The child may leave the house in the morning, but they can come right back around as soon as you leave and stay home all day. . . . The parents put all the responsibility on the child. They don't sit down and say `hey, did you do your homework, did you do this, did you do that, those who are not involved, and, therefore, the child sees that, well mom and dad don't care, I don't care either." (Teacher B2)

"The parents are pushing off on their children the responsibility and they can't handle it. Then they have children." (Teacher I2)

"They have to sit home and watch the other kids and do that when they should be studying and taking time for themselves and growing and learning about themselves, and not just taking the responsibility of being an adult." (Teacher I2)

- school-generated barriers, such as:
  - lack of time and space on the part of teachers to call parents;
  - attitude among teachers that it should not be their responsibility to call parents if their child does not attend school;
  - lack of effort on the part of the teachers to convey positive messages to parents;

In summary, teachers--and administrators in particular--enumerated mostly structural barriers and social conditions keeping parents out of school and making it difficult for educators to contact parents. While educators at City High occasionally blamed parents for not assuming their responsibility as parents, they generally talked about parents sympathetically, emphasizing with parents' daily struggles. Parents were mainly portrayed as victims of circumstances and poor social conditions, so enmeshed in the struggle of the community and daily survival that they simply do not find the time and opportunity to get involved in their children's education.

"That is a problem that the parent can't get here easily, and in the struggles in their community, a lot of it is just survival kinds of things, and a big thing would be `how do

I get there, I don't have transportation'. . . . Now I think that we think that parents don't care a lot of times, and I think they do care. But I think they are pretty overwhelmed by circumstances in their lives." (Staff A6)

"I think the parents . . . many of our parents never graduated from high school. They are heavily invested in making it from day to day, earning a living, handling social burdens that you and I cannot possibly conceive of, and they are often very young parents. Many of our children are raised by grandparents who have limited time and energy, particularly energy and, of course, financial resources. Their free time . . . well they don't have free time . . . their time goes to holding down 2-3 jobs to make it financially. Then there are those who have no concept of parenting and what that requires outside of actual physical care of a child, and they don't know what roles they can play in the school and/or they are not interested in participating in school because they did not have what we would call a normal high school experience. . . . A typical situation might be any of our students who are 15 and pregnant, whose mother was 15 and pregnant and dropped out of school and now has a child at City High, and that is the case here. . . . It is an unending cycle. So you have a 15-year-old who became a mother and now has a 15 year old at City High. That 15-year-old doesn't really know what it is to be a parent and to be supportive academically. We all want the best for our children, and I'm not saying that they don't, because they do want the best, but they have no idea of how to go about getting it. They don't or can't provide enrichment experiences. Your child will certainly have this, and my children have been involved in association athletics and music lessons, and everything that we could give them. Those children haven't, and lots of them are raising themselves. There are a lot of emancipated children who essentially provide for themselves, do everything for themselves. When you don't have parents who know what a typical high school experience is, they don't know how to provide that for their child because they never had that. The only time they come into the school is when we call them to say your son has been suspended, and you need to bring him back. The majority of those parents, when they come into conference with us, want the best for the child and they try, and we try to explain very simply what is needed but they don't have the skills to provide that kind of supervision. They work at night. They don't know what their children are doing at night. Children are on the street until 3 or 4 in the morning, then they come to school an hour late because they have overslept. They are not fed or they don't come because they don't have the right clothes. Those are all issues that we deal with a lot. Sometimes we see the parent when a child is involved in the criminal justice system. We don't see very many parents because of positive reasons. We do try to provide that. We have a senior parent reception at the end of the year. We will honor semester honor roll children, and when the kids are being honored at assemblies, we invite parents. We try to get them in for the positive things, but we see far more parents because we have called them in to say there is a problem . . . we need your help. Most parents are quite willing to help but they have no concept on how to do it." (Staff F2/3).

This portrayal of parents as being too overwhelmed by daily struggles to be able to get

involved in school in many cases appears to be right on target. Ms. R., for instance, can be seen as such a case. Unemployed, living with her mother who receives welfare for her seven children and grandchildren, Ms. R. has a son and daughter--both of high school age. The daughter used to attend City High before she dropped out of school. Ms. R. described her life and social conditions that basically keep her occupied with daily survival concerns. Having dropped out of school in the eighth grade, without support from her children's father, having had two severe car accidents and losing custody of her children to her mother, she seems unable to control her children who are involved in violence, affected by gang warfare in the community, and "hanging with the wrong crowd." The following quotes describe the situation:

> "A lot of my daughter's friends are in those violent circles. And I'm afraid she might get involved some day. My son had to come out of school, he was involved in violence, he had to fight to protect himself. We took him out. He is 14, . . . has a probation officer, missed the majority of the school year. . . . My daughter is 15 . . . she missed 15 consecutive days early in the school year. . . . When the kids dropped out of school, I didn't even know that. I was shocked. Perhaps they were not going to school and pretending. . . . I sat down and talked to the kids. They promised to go back. And then it started back up again. My son had started fighting. It wasn't a big fight, he was suspended for two days. At that particular time he completely stopped at X school. My mother would work it, trying to get him back into the school. . . . I asked my mom whether she had sent him back, and she said `nope.' The people from [name of 2 housing projects] had what they called a beef with people from [name of her community]. So my mother said she would not send him back because the kids would bring weapons to school. Because every time they'd go to school there would always be a fight. . . . I didn't know my daughter had missed so much school. She said friends, sorry excuses." (Parent R 2-4)

Ms. R. reported an attempt to communicate with the school. A meeting with her daughter and a guidance counselor had been scheduled, but "my daughter didn't show up. At night she said she hadn't been to school because she didn't have the proper shoes." (Ms. R.5). Ms. R. has enrolled her son in EduCare, planning to do the same with her daughter. EduCare, in her opinion, "helps kids with school, helps them keep out of trouble." (Ms. R.3).

Ms. R. does not blame the school for her children's situation. She mentioned her concern about insufficient security at school and thinks it would have been necessary to inform her earlier about her daughter's absence, but otherwise stated that she does not have any complaints about City High: "The school is fine." (Parent R.5). Throughout the interview, Ms. R. mainly described the situation, without attempts to locate the causes of failure, without blaming. In the end she talked about the past when her children attended elementary school. At that time she held a job and was very much involved in school. She concludes that "when one bad thing started, it never stopped." (Ms. R.5). As her statements make clear, she believes that her accidents, loss of custody and the resulting "hostile guilt" on her part all resulted in her loss of control over her children who, in turn, have not been able to "make it" in an environment shaped by violence and destruction. Considering this case in the context of frequent statements by educators about barriers to parent involvement, it is important to note that Ms. R. was the only parent I interviewed who clearly fit the image of a "parent who would like to be involved but is too overwhelmed to do it." On the other hand, this fact is likely related to the problem--as mentioned above--that she was one of the very few parents I was able to interview who had both been nominated as "uninvolved" and who lived under extremely poor socio-economic conditions. The above-mentioned assessments of educators may thus be correct: many parents at City High are perhaps indeed simply too preoccupied with survival and thus unable to support their children in school. More data has to be collected in order to assess this claim adequately.

In regard to all other parents interviewed in this study, however, the data reveals a striking difference in how teachers/staff on the one hand, and parents on the other hand, talk about barriers between parents and school. All other parents, whether involved or not, mentioned barriers to

school involvement that suggested the existence of a deep chasm between school and community. Not their own daily struggles, in other words, seem to keep these parents away, but rather a complete lack of trust in public schooling in general, and City High as well as its educators in particular.

The chasm between school and community was not only mentioned by parents who had been nominated as uninvolved parents and whose children were indeed failing, but also by parents who had been nominated as involved and/or whose children were doing well in school. The following barriers to parent involvement portrayed from the parents' perspectives illustrate this chasm:

- lack of trust/input in school's decisions: parents feel left out of decisions affecting the academic life of their children. One parent complained about her daughter being able to change courses without parental guidance. Two other parents did not understand the school's requirements, such as competency tests, as necessary or meaningful:

> "My daughter has to take that competency test. It's a writing composition test. And if kids don't pass they won't graduate. That's discouraging." (Parent Y2)

The school board, furthermore, was perceived as "sneaky," as not giving parents a chance. Parents also made statements indicating that they do not trust the quality of education their children receive, or how they perceive the school to deliver instruction. One parent whose daughter currently attends City High describes his experiences with his son who attended a different City Public School. That, in this parent's opinion, does not make a difference because "if it can happen at one school, it can happen at another school," and those experiences are at both

schools "the same thing." His wife described how the school, in her opinion, failed to provide the son with a quality education.

> "He had like three years of music, four classes, . . . and he isn't able to play music by notes, he still could not. . . . And yet, he got an A in the classroom but he can't play. . . . I think we see that a kid can go to high school, and they can be in a class, and because they may have a talent in one area or another area, for the school administration they will pull that kid out of that particular class to do a certain project for them, yet their classroom work is steadily going on, and that child is missing it." (Mother T3)

What is significant here is that lack of understanding or disagreement with school practices are expressed in a way that indicate a fundamental lack of trust in the school's and teachers' objectives.

> "It's just like you could use my son because he could play music, and they really aren't concerned about his education, it was just for the playing, they'll use him and when they're through, when the class or the schedule is over for the end of the year, or he graduates whether he has an education or not, `Hey, you're out, don't come back.' A football player, basketball player, it's the same thing, they use you and they put you out." (Father T3)

In the case of this particular set of parents, distrust toward the school is felt strongly. Their daughter is a strong student, and--against the school's advice--the parents plan to take her out of school early and send her to the Navy where ". . . she'll get paid, she'll have the opportunity to do her training, and at nighttime, if she wants to and get some college courses, she can do that too." (Parent T19) These parents cannot afford a college education for their daughter and--based on their experiences with their son--they mistrust the school's assessment of the availability of scholarships. They resent the school's attempt to keep their daughter in school, in effect prescribing to them, as they see it, what is best for their daughter's future. They explain:

> "The [school staff member] went off on me and said that the plan that she had for our daughter was better than our plan." (Mother T18)

"If she [the daughter] stays here and she goes to high school the last year, what are they going to guarantee you? Can they guarantee her a scholarship? No one can say that. . . . We just wanted her to get an education. If she didn't get a scholarship, there's no way in the world that we can come up with all the money ourselves for her to go to college. They promised me that my son would get some scholarships, and he got out of school and not one musical scholarship, took the courses, all the many courses, and he didn't get one musical scholarship." (Father T20)

His wife elaborates:

"He didn't have the other academic skills, but they kept shooting him that stuff, `son, when you graduate, we're going to help you.' But we knew as his parents that he didn't have the academic skills. How are you going to go to college with general courses? But they kept on lying to us. . . . That's what I hate, that's what I hate with a vengeance. They lied to my child, they made us look like the big bad wolf, they promised him all these things, and then when he graduates, he out there to hang up to dry. There's no one to help him." (Mother T20)

This set of parents voiced their lack of trust in public schools in general, and City High in particular, in other areas as well: why the school held fund raisers and how this money was spent, the school's practices and policies in regard to student discipline, teaching strategies, quality of instruction, teachers' attitudes toward students, teachers' work ethic, curriculum content, etc.

"I don't see that the school is teaching my kids the education that they're going to need after they get out of school. . . . They're not measuring up, and they're not going to be able to make it." (Father T26)

Other parents shared this obvious sense of distrust in and disappointment with the school:

"Teachers don't communicate, I don't even think they care." (Parent Y1)
"It's like they [school personnel] don't care. . . . They don't know what's going on. . . . They don't work together." (Parent Z1)

- communication: parents mentioned that City High did not contact them although their children had missed numerous days of school, were failing, etc. The interpretation as to why that had happened was that the school "simply does not care."

Parents not only perceive a lack of communication as a barrier to their involvement, but also a lack of sincerity and respect for both students and parents on the part of school personnel.

> "Teachers show a lack of sincerity at conferences. They are just interested in their paycheck. And those kids can pick up that insincerity in a heartbeat. . . . They talk to you even if they don't mean it. . . . I have been the one who has to call the school. Every time I called that was no help. And then we had to go over there, it was a song-and-dance. Negative attitude, child is failing anyway, you gotta keep going and calling and going and calling." (Y1/2)

> "Their [the teachers'] education brings a big head, they think they know more about the child's problems than the parents know. . . . How can a person that doesn't even have their own family together, but yet educated, tell me how to run my family when theirs isn't doing so good either? I'm shocked, I don't understand. . . . Maybe I may not have a degree behind my name, at least I have a family, and I have been keeping it straight. Then, those with degrees haven't got theirs together, but yet they can tell me because of a book they've read how to raise a kid. . . . So the question is, why not come back to the basics and get with the parents, and let the parents and all of us come and raise this kid together? . . . So last time we go to school they looked down on us, . . . they look at us as not really knowing what we're doing." (Father T7/18)

- lack of caring: parents indicated that school personnel at City High does not respect students, does not care about students, and fails to encourage them.

  Parents blamed teachers for the same attitude for which teachers blamed parents:

  > "In high school there is not a lot of cooperation. High schools think that kids are adults, you don't need to cooperate. . . . The teachers figure that between elementary and high school the kids don't need as much attention. Once a week they should have a session and just let the kids talk. What seems small to an adult seems big to a child." (Parent Y2)

- differing value systems: parents perceive gaps between their own moral values and those they see taught in the school. Disagreements exist in regard to family and religious values, traditions, and cultural heritage:

> "They sent home this piece of paper asking if I want my children to learn home living. And in this home living book, the family they have is two men and two women raising a child, and I said, no, I don't want that. . . . It just seems like to me everything that I've

been teaching my children down through the years because like I said, I'm in church and I've been teaching them the Bible way, so I didn't want them teaching my child something that I did not believe in." (Mother T27)

"They [school personnel] said that the reason that she was sneaking behind our backs dating was because we wouldn't let her so-called "date." They said we should have started letting her date at 16, she is 17 now. . . . We raised her and we taught her our values and the way the school has been in opposition because now she is telling me all the freedom she has at school, and when she comes home and tries to bring it here, it's not going to work. . . . So that's what's making it so hard on her. They're telling her one thing, and we're telling her something else." (Father T39)

"So that's why we have one room set aside, and we turned it into a library, and it has all kinds of African culture, and black culture. And we have to let our kids learn all that we can teach them because they might not be getting it in the schools." (Mother T24)

- a divided community: a strong theme in conversations with parents were references to "those people" or "elements," i.e. other parents and their children, who were seen as creating problems for all students/parents at City High.

"Socially, I'm pleased and not so pleased. He [the son] has met some of the nicest children, developed a very nice core of friends there, but I am very aware that there is another element in the school which is probably as much societal as it has to do with the school." (Parent V1)

According to participants, in the past a strong community of educators and parents used to be concerned about disciplining the children, keeping them "on track" and motivated to do well in school. These ties have now been destroyed and left teachers alienated from the community, "handcuffed" by law not to discipline children any longer and concerned only about their own well being. Along the same lines, parents are also perceived as alienated from each other. The Black community, according to participants, is affected by people's preoccupation with material things, left without a dream, without hope and thus without an investment in their children's education. The problems of a divided parent community and the chasm between parents and teachers feed

on each other, as the following parent quotes illustrate:

> "[In the past] it was the whole community, it was the family, it was parents pulling together, it was a community . . . the whole neighborhood was a tribe that pulled, that if I messed up it was so inbred that we knew each other, that if my child did wrong, this lady down the street would say 'I know you child, I'm going to tell your parents.' [Nowadays] we're so divided and so separated as a community. So when we go to school everyone stands in their own independence that this teacher doesn't want to get involved, so she'll only teach her class, and you either learn or you don't learn. We had teachers that . . . cared so much--which is illegal now--. . . we had teachers that if I cut class, being a teenager and I went down to the poolroom, we had teachers who would come down there and get you and bring you back. It's not that family developing anymore. It's not that community anymore. . . . What they [teachers] settled for was money. The . . . Volvo, this and that, they settled for material things. There's nothing wrong with material things but they're losing themselves. . . . It's black people without a dream, without a hope, without a vision. Yes, it [the schools] is predominantly black again, but it's predominantly black with no dreams, with no hopes, with no confidence that they can do anything better. . . . Being broke is only temporary, but being poor is a state of mind. . . . If you on'y see nothing but dope pushers, you only see nothing but people of welfare, no one tells you that you can do better, and show you books and stuff that we have the ability and we have a culture, then you give up." (Father T12/15)

> "Most black people never had fine homes, fine cars, and stuff like that. . . . The only thing they're doing now is working to make as much money as they can so they can get a finer house or a finer car, and they're struggling. They want to wear the finest of clothes and stuff but they're letting their child go, not paying any attention to what's going on with their child." (Mother T15)

Mr. T. summarizes the loss of community in these words: "We sold out to the American dream, to be honest with you." (Father T/16) Students, of course, are also affected by the loss of community and vision, as well as the preoccupation with material possessions. They copy what they see adults doing; participate in the adults' world of drugs, violence, and guns. One participant described youngsters as disrespecting authority, and enmeshed in a world of desire to consume in which

> ". . . it's just the kid and the athlete, . . . the kid is commercialized without family being included. So he dresses, not according to the way his mother wants him to dress; he dresses the way the athlete wants him to dress. He does, basically, what

> commercialization pushes on him. . . . As a parent you don't see it [advertisement strategies targeting youth] because we're not as educated as the people who market." (Parent X5)

Parents, in turn, lose control over their children, something that did not easily happen in the tightly knit communities of the past. When asked to explain this loss of community, participants reflected back on their past, their school experiences in segregated all-Black schools serving an African-American community that was racially homogeneous but socially diverse. The school was a strong focal point of the community in which teachers lived and communicated with parents outside of school. As one teacher remembers:

> "You remember when you were in school everything was in a triangle. The school, the community, the church and the parents, everything. Now the bridge between all of this is being broken we got to find some way of getting it back together because we are losing." (Teacher D8)

The impoverishment of the inner-city combined with White and middle-class Black flight left stigmatized schools serving the economically disadvantaged, while teachers live in the suburbs, out of touch with the communities the schools serve. The following quotes by parents--as well as one teacher--illustrate these perceptions of having lost the community of the "good old days."

> "I hate to say it, I believe that we learned more under segregation than we did under integration, to be honest with you. We lost a lot, we actually did. We did lose a lot. I think that's why we are in this mess we're in." (Father T13)

> "I went to a segregated school, . . . the objective for most black kids at that time was to be accepted and education was a factor, the drive for education because it gave you a tool, but first of all, this tool that you had was one most of your parents didn't have or had very little of, so their objective was to instill this in you. . . . You weren't ashamed because the teachers started talking about your street. . . . I just lived on Clay Street, so--a lot of people lived on Clay Street. We had poor, we had doctors, we had store owners, we had alcoholics, you had a variety of people in that community. Nobody knew whether you were poor or rich or whose son you were because you just said Clay Street. But if you say `I live in [name of housing project]; people immediately get an image. . . . People get a mental concept of what you're like and sometimes it's hard to, socially, to reach out to

the community as a teacher when you don't understand that community or there isn't a community at all, it's just people. . . . Too many interests have really broken communities up. You got to realize, bussing, people moved out, they ran from busing, they moved into the counties. Kids were bus"ed all over the place . . . and the traditions have been lost. . . . When the social setting of the community school fails, where traditionally kids loved the school, we loved the school we went to. . . . But when you break that tradition, then parents don't have any identity with the school. . . . And it's hard to rebuild a community when you don't have the social setting or a certain structure there to start with. . . . It's much easier when you start [building communities] with a new school like [name of affluent suburb], when you start with people with income brackets of $60,000 and above in a household, versus starting off when you got people where the average person is making less than $15,000 a year. (Parent X6, 11)

"The Whites have moved out [of the city], and with busing the concept was to make the schools equal but it's right back to where it was. . . . People come into the city and work, but when the job is done, where do they go? Back outside of the city. That's why we're trying to come up with different policemen, someone who can learn to live in the community, to try to pull the community back to make a oneness in the community. The problem is bigger than you, it's bigger than me. . . . The school system is only a symptom of something else, so you have to go back to the basics of the family. If you can get the family straight, and you can get the kids and that unit straight, then it will go into the community and into the school." (Father T9)

"Everyone wants to work in the city but nobody wants to live there. No one wants to give back what they are taking away. . . . No one is giving back to the downtown areas, to the areas where they are failing, economically failing. . . . There needs to be some type of tie here. Bring back or get back our community." (Former Student /Teacher I10)

- lack of parent representation: one parent--visibly involved in school organizations and activities--criticized the lack of genuine parent representation. He described the effects of nonfunctional parent-teacher organizations centering around educators' agendas, not responding to parents interests and needs. In reflection of the poorly attended annual award giving event at City High, he concluded that the particular person responsible for the event's organization failed to encourage parent and student input.

"This was a dictatorship, the administration did this without consulting the PTSA much,

there was no time or effort put into this event. You need almost a personal invitation. . . . And it's going to take parents to get parents, like a lot of cases it takes children to get children. . . . Parents need to see other parents active. When they come to school they need to see parents there, parents performing, parents speaking." (Parent X1/9)

He described how events and organizations theoretically meant to reach and involve parents fail to do so because issues of parent concern are ignored or downplayed while student input is only minimal.

"These activities are nonfunctional, like PTA, they're not functioning properly. So in order to get them back started, a lot of times you got principals running things, teachers running things. . . . Education is still centered around what they do. And a lot of parents are not interested in your political overtone. . . . In the parents' judgment things are not fine, my kids don't have books, the schedule is mixed up, you know, I'm having problems with this teacher, that's what the PTA is all about, to resolve these types of differences. . . . I try to tell principals 'it's an absolute necessity for you to talk about things that would alarm them [parents] and arouse their attention, but you tell them `everything is fine.'" (Parent X9/14)

- school's reputation: it was explained by participants that the school's negative reputation, perpetuated by the media, contributes to parents' fear, alienation from the school and lack of involvement. The chasm between school and community, in other words, is perpetuated by how outsiders represent City High.

"The school does not get as much recognition as other schools in other areas, probably it's over there. There is a stigma. Their [the school's] opportunities are not broad, that has to do with where they're located, in a predominantly low economic area, surrounded by housing projects is a stigma. They have a hard time drawing large crowds." (Parent S1)

This point was emphasized by a teacher as well:

"You have a lot of people on the outside looking in. . . . City High school has all five housing developments which means they have a strike against them in the eyes of everybody else, even in the eyes of some of our teachers here. . . . They are not supposed to be successful because they come from those particular areas. . . . The minute something negative happens at City High it is splattered all over the papers. Very rarely do we get the good things in the paper. People on the outside . . . are forming opinions, and they know absolutely nothing about it." (Teacher C6)

- parents' as well as administrators' lack of understanding and appreciation of teacher's roles and responsibilities: one parent pointed out how many other parents, as well as the school's administration, fail, in his opinion, to show appreciation of teachers' daily efforts and struggles. This lack of information, insight, or consideration decreases teacher morale and further contributes to the chasm between City High school and the communities it serves.
- lack of identity-building measures at public schools in general: just as parents seem to have lost a sense of belonging to City High school, it was claimed that the students lack rituals, routines, values that would build and strengthen community and identification with the school.

"You don't see the unification there, you don't see the identity. It's more like whatever society is doing is what the kids are doing, what society is wearing, whatever thing is in, the hip hop thing is in, that's what is in the schools. . . . It produces a weaker system." (Parent X15)

- lack of need communication: parents remarked that they do not feel as if the school invites or "needs" them any longer. They feel that elementary schools used to communicate to parents that they were needed, but ". . . as the children get older the schools have less and less things for the parents to be involved in." (Mother T39) And while educators at City High suspect that parents view and treat their children as if they were grown, parents mirror that assumption about educators.

"They [school personnel] treat the kids like young adults. So that means that if they are young adults, they don't need a lot of parental guidance. . . . I still think of her as a minor, and they think of her as a young adult." (Father T39)

Implications: Teachers and staff at City High school tend to approach the problem of lacking parental involvement with the assuming that parents are kept away from school due to their overwhelming day-to-day struggles. While the community's socio-economic problems are certainly an important factor explaining low parental involvement at City High, data of this study offers some additional insights. First of all, not all parents of City High school students are in the situation of having to struggle for their day-to-day survival. In addition, even some parents who do operate under some extremely adverse socio-economic conditions nevertheless get involved against all odds. And other parents do not get involved although they do not seem to face severe economic hardships or family problems. This suggests that there are additional reasons for the lack of parent involvement at City High.

One factor to consider is that poor social conditions of the community have "spilled over" into the school and rendered it a problematic place in which to learn even for those students who do not come from problem ridden homes and who are doing well academically.

The following portrays the perspective of a current City High student who is doing very well academically, and yet displays frustration with and lack of enthusiasm for her school:

> "Personally, I don't like high school anymore. Like the area that my school is in, we've had problems recently, and the problems seem to be worse. We've had violence in our school from outside on the street and stuff, and it's like nobody's willing to help." (Student M8)

Above and beyond the effects of immediate social problems such as crime, drugs, and poverty in the community, it appears that many parents simply have given up on public schooling. At least they have given up on the institution of public schooling as they witness it in an inner-city context. They do not perceive the school as a viable vehicle to provide their children with a chance at

future economic stability. They do not see it as a tool instrumental in helping their children to "make it" once they graduate.

> "You've got your average parents there at this particular time who have lost faith in the school system. If they could afford it they'd put their children in the private schools, and those who can afford to put their kids in private schools do it." (Parent X10)

Some parents feel betrayed by the school system, and City High as its representation. They do not trust teachers or administrators. In effect, they blame the school for their children's failures. Even in the cases in which their children are doing well academically, some parents perceive teachers as belonging to another class -- distant, unapproachable, and alienated from their communities.

Compared to existing scholarly studies that have documented this dynamic to be at work among students, this study suggests that these perceptions are in no way limited to students. Theoretically framed by the work of Kerckhoff (1976) and Ogbu (1978, 1981, 1987), several studies have demonstrated that perceptions/assumptions concerning the value of education as a means of upward mobility are important determinants of students' academic motivation, and consequently academic performance. Findings in this study indicate that the same applies to parents. Their involvement in school is low when they do not perceive schools to provide their children with the tools for upward social mobility. It appears likely that this distrust is not so much specific to City High as it can be commonly found toward all public schools of its kind, whether they be inner-city public schools in the town under study or in other, similar, urban centers. The resulting general inclination among parents "to give up," furthermore, seems to be shared and reflected not only be students, but even by educators themselves. According to participants--and more data ought to be collected in order to assess the scope of this problem--

students mirror this general lack of motivation, while educators generally accept their failure. A former City High student explains:

> "I think we are accepting the failure. The kids just don't want to learn. It is all on ourselves. I don't think we have the motivation." (Former Student/Teacher I, 3/4)

> A teacher's assessment: "I think some of these students are so used to failure that they expect it. Like one of my students told me `well, I'm going to do something to get a lot of money.' They don't know what that something is, some do, the illegal way. It goes all around this school, all the projects around here know nothing but drugs, and that is all they see." (Teacher B5)

In short, parental involvement at City High school is low for qualitatively different reasons: clearly, the economic and social struggles of many families represent, as shown above, one basic cause. According to the interviews for this project, however, there is at least one other major obstacle in place, namely the lack of a meaningful relationship between schools and the communities they serve. What appears to be present, instead, is an increasingly widening chasm, originating primarily from lack of confidence--or even hope--that inner city public schools like City High can and will provide an education ultimately useful to students, one that would allow them to escape the varied traps in which they are--or in any case perceive themselves to be--caught. Public education, in other words, is no longer perceived as a viable launching pad toward social or economic success.

It would require further research to explore the various factors that prevent parents from having much confidence in schools like City High to provide their children with the necessary tools to "make it." This study suggests that a wide range of reasons are at play: for one, the school is described as not "doing its job, not caring, not setting standards, etc." Indeed, City High is in many ways seen as not being able to do its job due to the spillover of social problems

generated elsewhere. And finally, numerous of the interviews indicate that society in general, and the economy in particular, tend to be perceived as providing few --if any-- opportunities for the particular student population served by City High.

In order to arrive at a better grounded and more detailed understanding of these issues, there is clearly need for further research: higher numbers of parents, educators, but also students would need to be interviewed, and other schools, similar to City High, would have to be included for comparative purposes. On the other hand, the range of this research project was sufficient to demonstrate that if one attempts to understand parent involvement at a school like City High, an appreciation of the social and economic conditions of each respective family will not suffice. Indeed, this study suggests that there is no simple clear-cut correlation between socio-economic status of the family on the one hand, and involvement, hope, confidence, and investment on the other. On the contrary, the larger social and cultural context in which families live and work is as significant as their own individual situation. In a community in which lack of opportunities, hopelessness, and violence predominate, each family's or student's individual success or failure tends to diminish in significance. Who is surprised--or alarmed--by yet another dropout from a school known for its high dropout rate? What good is academic success in a school with a troubled reputation and few--if any--means to help students beyond graduation? And what does "hard work" or "accomplishment" mean in a community whose members frequently feel trapped by forces beyond their control?

What we are witnessing, rather, are the effects of community erosion, a missing sense of belonging, and what can be called disillusionment with American public institutions. Since schools inevitably reflect the social context within which they are situated, it is not surprising that

all of the phenomena mentioned above shape life at City High. In regard to parental involvement, it will thus never suffice merely to recommend a few changes affecting school practices or school policies. Rather, policymakers, educators, and parents need to acknowledge--to the extent they have not already done so--the far-ranging complexities of issues that would need to be tackled if parent-school relations at City High were to be significantly improved: to establish a larger long-term agenda in order to find direction, and a viable short-term agenda in order to resolve whatever lends itself to immediate practical resolution. Rather than promoting discouragement, acknowledging the ultimate need for a far-ranging agenda could get teachers, administrators, and parents off the hook of carrying responsibilities currently beyond their control. It would help put problems into perspective and clear the path toward what can realistically be addressed and accomplished today, and what needs to be tackled in the long run, but will possibly have to await another day. It seems prudent, then, to generate different levels of recommendations for City High, some short-term and possible to accomplish, others long-term and connected to a larger struggle, for City High will never be able to divorce or insulate itself from the larger social context of which it is part, which it reflects, and which it thus--despite contrary intentions--frequently helps to perpetuate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Short-term:

1. Build upon existing strengths: existing conditions as well as practices and policies that enable parent involvement should be continued and expanded (see section "Enablers").

2. Schedule sensitively according to parents' needs: whenever organizationally possible, parents ought to be given choices/shifts to attend parent-teacher conferences and other

meetings. Experiments in the past when parent-teacher conferences were offered in the morning and at night seemed to have been successful.

3. Provide transportation for parents: it is suggested that City High makes attempts to "get to the parents if parents do not get to the school." School buses and/or buses of community organizations/churches, etc. could possibly be used to provide transportation for parents who do not have access to vehicles.

4. Mail letters using envelopes that do not identify sender: since some students seem to "screen" mail to their parents it may be advisable to use envelopes in parent mailings that do not identify the school as sender.

5. Hold meetings in the community: ties between the school and community could be strengthened if selected events would be held in communities, at meeting centers, churches, etc.

6. Report card pick-up: if parents are required to pick up their children's report cards it seems sensible not to immediately mail out cards in case they were not picked up. It ought to be communicated that parents are indeed expected to pick up report cards but they should have a time span of several days to do it.

7. Involve parents and students at meetings and events: example: annual award giving event might benefit from student speeches, student performances, etc. As one highly active parent said: "It takes parents to get parents involved just as it takes kids to get kids involved."

8. Communicate the school's needs: it is recommended that the school make an effort to communicate its need for/welcoming attitude toward parent involvement. Such efforts could possibly help overcome the impression among City High parents that the "school does not need

us anymore because educators think the kids are grown."

9. Showcase and celebrate success: it seems as if parents/students, as well as educators at City High would benefit from learning more about the "success stories" at City High: students who are doing well, successful alumni, involved parents could be featured at events, invited to give speeches, share experiences, invite dialogues about their struggles and success, etc.

10. Communicate with parents frequently, avoiding communication that is purely crisis-oriented: communicate success as well as failure/problems.

11. Introduce an open communication forum: parents voiced interest in an un- or semi-structured forum in which both students and parents could talk to each other and to City High educators about academic as well as non-academic issues, grievances, concerns, etc.

12. Provide teachers with private space and time to make parent phone calls.

13. Recruit teachers who have a special rapport with students/parents to be in charge of events/parent-teacher organizations, etc.: it is recommended that the school administration make efforts to put those educators in leadership positions of committees organizing community oriented events who have already established close ties with students and/or parents.

14. Revisit the possibility of home visits: the school conducted home visits in the past. Those experiences may be helpful in overcoming current barriers to the idea of teachers visiting students' homes. One successful practice used in the past: pairing teachers to visit homes.

15. Continue to organize events that provide information on financial aid/scholarships/grants. Target especially 9th graders. It seems important that students begin high school with an awareness--shared by their parents--that there is a "life after City High," i.e. that there are realistic opportunities once they successfully complete their education at City High.

16. Continue to organize entertaining events, featuring student talent, or events around topics of direct concern/relevance to the students' and their families' lives.

17. Increase contact with feeder schools: establish contact with middle school parents in order to facilitate close parent relationship with educators at City High once their children attend high school.

18. Organize projects/events that involve students and families: examples in the past included a week long Shakespeare festival inviting the entire community to participate.

19. Establishing a generally welcoming and parent-friendly atmosphere: professional development activities and other meetings could be devoted to discussions and learning about best practices of parent-school collaboration.

Long-term

1. Public relations and general education: an array of measures could be taken in order to overcome the negative ramifications of the "bad rep" of schools such as City High. Scholars, policy makers, central administrators, and others are encouraged to focus on examples of excellence achieved by the school rather than its shortcomings and/or failures. Additionally, the general public needs to better understand the scope and severity of the challenges faced by schools such as City High.

2. Community-school relations: it is vital--in the long run--for schools to reclaim the central place they once occupied in the community. One suggestion surfacing in this research was that schools--as multi-million dollar facilities--be made available to the community beyond the education of its children. Athletic facilities, for instance, could be used after school hours and on weekends. Classes could be offered for parents on Saturdays (GED classes, vocational skill

training, parenting classes, "homework support classes," workshops, etc.). Parents, as well as senior citizens, could be invited to visit the school and volunteer as tutors, etc. Practices could be borrowed from other schools. One elementary school principal, for instance, invited members of the business community into his school as lunch buddies for the children.

One interviewee, furthermore, mentioned the necessity to understand the community's (economic) struggle and to use creative ways of establishing ties with community members. Example: enticing parents to attend meetings by giving out door prizes, items of economic value to them, organizing shopping tours to malls and factory outlets, etc.

3. Collaboration between schools and social service organizations/churches, etc.: in order to increase effectiveness of services rendered to City High students and their families it is recommended to enhance collaboration with other organizations (Mental Health, Juvenile Justice System, etc.) The churches could be another avenue through which to effectively reach and communicate with parents and other family members of students.

4. Rethinking school districts and zoning: Educational policy makers are encouraged to rethink the way school districts/zones are drawn. Efforts ought to be made to diversify districts in regard to socio-economic as well as racial/cultural background of the communities served.

5. Counseling, mentor/buddy programs, and support systems for educators: educators at City High as well as other schools, are increasingly challenged to deal effectively with a multitude of problems beyond the academic realm. Professional development as well as peer counseling, mentoring programs and other initiatives could be encouraged in order to support educators faced with a multitude of complex social issues, both concerning their students and their own personal lives.

CASE 3: PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AT RURAL HIGH SCHOOL

SETTING AND DATA COLLECTION:

Rural High school (pseudonym) is located in a rural area approximately 35 miles from the inner city. The school served 910 students in September 1995, 8th through 12th grade. 6 students are Asian-Pacific, 100 are African-Americans, and 804 are Caucasian. Socio-economically a variety of backgrounds are represented, mostly working and middle class.

Rural High is located at the outskirts of a small town and adjacent to the elementary and middle schools as well as the vocational center serving the county. Especially the elementary and middle grades currently experience a rather drastic enrollment increase which led to the installment of trailers behind the elementary and middle school. Based on one assistant principal's estimates, approximately 70% of the graduates will continue their education, 40% at four-year colleges and 30% at two-year college programs, trade schools
or with the Armed Forces. Most of the remaining 30% will seek employment immediately after graduation.

The vocational center adjacent to Rural High is currently administered by the school (they used to be separate institutions). Various vocational programs are offered, including courses in car mechanics, nursing, farming, home economics, etc. The assistant principal described in-house tracking, meaning that about one third of the student population are college bound, predominantly taking courses of academic nature. Approximately 15-20% of the students take mainly vocational courses while the remaining students take both academic and vocational classes. According to estimates of school personnel and parents, tests scores and college acceptance rates have steadily increased over the last few years. Participants of this study seemed quietly content with their

school. In comparison with the other two cases analyzed for this study Rural High appeared "homey," a school tightly connected with the community it serves.

The researchers surveyed 25 Rural High school teachers/staff and conducted 9 in-depth, open-ended interviews with teachers and staff, and 6 interviews with parents. All parents had been nominated as "involved" parents; researchers were unable to gain access to so called "uninvolved" parents.

FINDINGS

DEGREE OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT: Participants in the survey indicated that they view parent involvement at Rural High as low to mediocre. Interviews, however, revealed that a small group of parents seem to have significant influence on Rural High.

Nine teachers/staff members indicated in their survey responses that they perceive parent involvement at Rural High to be moderate, 12 as low, and 3 as very low. The following quotes are typical:

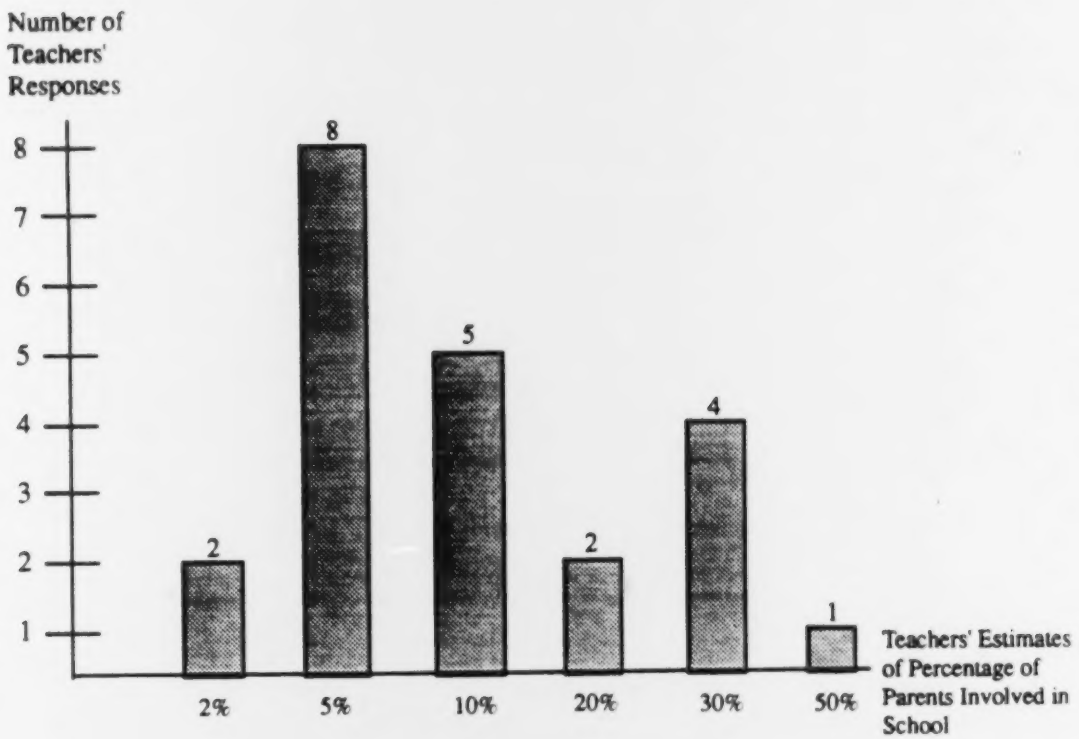
> "I just wish we had more of it [parental involvement]. If we had more of it, we would be in a lot better shape." (Teacher V6)

> "I would like to see more [parental involvement]. . . . I feel like it's moderate." (Teacher T1)

When asked to estimate the percentage of parents involved in school the mode (most frequently occurring number) was 5 (seven teachers estimated that 5% of parents are involved in school). The following table demonstrates the distribution of teachers' estimates of parental involvement at Rural High, or--put differently--it shows how many teachers estimated a certain percentage of parents as being involved in school.

Rural High School

Teachers' Estimates of Percentage of Parents Involved in School



(Note: (3) survey respondents did not give percentages)

Mixed feelings seemed to exist in regard to the quality of involvement; 7 respondents indicated that the quality is good, 9 moderate, 6 poor, 2 very poor, and one answer did not apply.

The responses given to the question why they perceive parental involvement at Rural High to be that way, are listed in Appendix E.

In summary, teachers/staff at Rural High perceive two groups of parents: a small group of highly involved parents--mostly parents of students who are involved in extracurricular activities--and a larger group of parents who are not visibly involved. Reasons for lacking involvement range from apathy and lack of information to time constraints, and many more. While the survey responses allow to map the overall situation as perceived by teachers/staff at Rural High, interview data provide an in-depth view of parent involvement at Rural High. It should be mentioned, however, that the perspective of parents who seem to perceive barriers to school involvement is absent. The following account is based exclusively on teacher/staff and "involved parents" accounts.

DIVISIONS: it became obvious at Rural High that both the school and community are stratified along several lines. The degree and nature of parental involvement seems directly related to these stratifications. Data for this study revealed the following stratifications:

- vocational-academic: the school is subdivided into groups of students who are academically oriented and those who are mainly vocationally oriented. One of the vocational education teachers reported that his/her classes serve the function of "dumping grounds" for students who are planning to go to college but need electives in order to fill their class load. In terms of student work ethics as well as parental involvement sees distinct difference between his/her classes and

academic subjects which draw more parent involvement either because they are required or because they draw college-oriented students.

> "I'm isolated and departmentalized. I would say vocational, we have less parental involvement because our students aren't those students who are going on for higher education and whose parents are pushing them and working with them to be accepted in college, and so on. I think when we have parent-teacher conferences we probably have fewer students than anybody else does. It seems to me . . . those teachers who really see a lot of parents for conferences are those required subjects, especially English and government as seniors. The ones that can perhaps keep a child from graduating. . . . I certainly have had very few parents in my years of teaching this program that have ever made an effort to contact me for a conference or come to a conference. I have had many years where I have not seen a single parent on conference days." (Teacher R4)

According to him/her it is programs like his/hers that are being used to "babysit" students with severe discipline problems:

> "I would say some of the students who are failing my class are failing other classes. They are the discipline problems in the school. They are in here because nobody knows where to put them. Nobody knows what to do with them, and sometimes I feel I'm a babysitter, and I get frustrated with that." (Teacher R5)

This teacher observed that many students in his/her program grow up in problem-ridden families, a factor that further impedes parental involvement in school.

- high-achievers vs. low-achievers: teachers agreed that they generally have more contact with parents of those students who are doing well academically than with those students who are not. One teacher described how students in "advanced" classes benefit from myriad advantages over students in "regular classes":

> "It is, I guess, fairly true, unfortunately, that a lot of the advanced ones have the economic advantages too. The ones that are placed in the advanced classes have computers at home and things like that, so their parents are helping in that category. . . . I guess maybe the advanced kids are just probably a little more active in talking and discussing their academics at home than the regular kids are. . . . I find that my advanced parents are much more likely to call me than the ones in my regular class. I can't think of really any

instances where I had a parent in a regular classroom call me. I have had numerous occasions where parents in my advanced classes call me." (Teacher W4)

According to one teacher of a talented and gifted program, there may be exceptions to that rule. S/he reported that s/he does not see many parents of talented/gifted children "because they have fewer problems than other students anyway." (Teacher V2) S/he conceited, however, that in "regular" classes parents of high achievers are seen more frequently than parents of low achieving students.

> "On parent conference day . . . you sort of get the impression of, well, now I saw all these parents that I don't need to, but I didn't see any of the ones that I needed to." (Teacher V3/4)

It is possible--and more data would need to be collected regarding this issue--that just as students cluster in academically fairly homogeneous classes, parents tend to know primarily other parents whose children are tracked into the same academic levels as their children.

Likewise, parents who are highly involved in school activities/extracurricular activities tend to see as their primary reference other parents who are similarly involved.

> "I really don't know what the parents of the children who are in the less advanced classes do because when it is time for me to go and do any of these things [engage in school related activities] I'm seeing a lot of parents of children that are in the more advanced courses or at least in the upper classes. I don't know if that says anything as far as the involvement of parents of children who are in the lower classes or not, but I don't see them." (Parent D5)

> "In [name of county] I would say that there are probably a group of us that are typical of myself. It has been that same group of boys that has played sports together since they were six, and they all are now juniors and seniors. So the parents have been involved and stayed together and we have come up that way together. I have seen some parents fall by the wayside. They just haven't stayed as involved as we have, but the group of people that I deal with and that I am affiliated with, I'm just typical. I'm just one of a crowd." (Parent R4/5)

Implications: Rural High is characterized by numerous stratifications dividing students and parents alike. These stratifications need to be taken into account if one wants to understand the nature of parental involvement at Rural High as well as offer recommendations as to how to possibly improve both degree and nature of parental involvement.

TYPES OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

- Visible Parent Involvement supporting school activities: as stated above, participants of this study perceived the number of parents visibly involved at Rural High as low. For many parents involvement seems limited to crisis communication, getting involved in case a problem occurs. And yet there exists a small group of highly visible and active parents, dedicated especially to the support of the extracurricular activities of their children.

> "I would say parental involvement here is limited. . . . The involvement generally is limited to parents who are having some type of problem and want it worked out, or it's the parents who are really dedicated to what their students are doing and want to be involved with whatever activity that might be, whether it be athletics or some type of club or some type of activity that is going on." (Staff Z1)

This small group of extremely dedicated parents consists of both mothers and fathers whose activities include raising money for clubs, teams, the band, as well as chaperoning trips, working concession stands and even putting up lights at the baseball field.

> "This year a group of parents, we formed a baseball booster's club this year. We went to the board of supervisors and said, we want to get $30,000 from the county to put lights on the high school field. The lights were going to cost us $60,000. We assured the board of supervisors that we would in fact have the other $30,000 to put the lights up. The lights are now up and they are working and we are playing baseball under the lights. That was a group of like 14-20 parents that got involved, got together and said, hey if we are going to do this, let's do it. Because we were all upset about not being able to go to the baseball games because we worked until 5:00 or 5:30. The baseball games were played at 4:30 or 5:00, so by the time we got from our jobs to [name of county], the game was over. We

> didn't get a chance to see that ball game. This year, since the lights have gone up, the crowds are tremendously large. It is almost like a football crowd. You get a lot of parents. You don't get nearly as many because the high school students don't come out to support the baseball team like they do the football team, but still you have more people showing up. That is encouraging. Because you are showing participation with the school and you are showing the school that, hey, look we have done this. We have this group of parents involved, let's try to get some more involved and we can do some other things." (Parent R6)

This type of parent involvement seems to be a major factor contributing to a relatively high visibility of Rural High in its community: the band--supported by parents--plays at public community events, the community attends athletic events, the local newspaper features the school's calendar and reports what is going on at the school generally, etc. One parent recalls her experiences selling advertisements to local businesses in order to raise money for the band.

> "The band, I have seen these parents are so well organized and so driven, I guess for the kids, and in going out and selling the ads. The community is very, very supportive of what is going on here, and they come and the stands are filled. . . . I am well impressed with the community here. Like I said, when you go out and try to beg money, the people are very supportive, maybe that is why we do so well. I had one company here . . . that we were asking for x amount for a page of advertisement to support one of our band functions, and I didn't even look at the check . . . and he (the business owner) had given me at least four times as much as the ad costs." (Parent D8)

Parent Control and Influence

The data revealed, furthermore, a rather impressive degree of influence exerted by a small group of vocal parents when it comes to matters deemed important by them, for instance issues of morality. One parent, for instance, recalled how a group of parents was able to convince the football coach that it would be morally questionable to take the team out to a local restaurant that encourages frivolous dress and behavior of its waitresses. The trip was cancelled, and the team ordered chicken. Parents were also able to exert pressure on the coaches to actively discourage and punish alcohol and drug abuse of football team members.

Yet, another example of parent control at Rural High pertains to the style of cheerleading, as the following account reveals:

> "I think, for instance the cheerleaders. In our surrounding counties, some of the cheers that the cheerleaders do are just vulgar. I mean it's kind of a joke, but we call them the bump and grind girls, because they have gone that route which is very popular to do the bump and grind cheers, and the parents of our cheerleaders here have made it quite clear to the cheerleaders' sponsors that is not the kind of cheers that they want our girls to do, and because of that involvement, we don't do those cheers. I don't have a daughter cheering, but I know parents who do and I have said gee, our girls do such clean-cut, nice cheers, why is that? And several of them have said because we have made is quite clear to the cheering staff that we don't want otherwise. So I think that symbolizes that the parents have said no we don't want our daughters bumping and grinding." (Parent E9)

Parent Advocacy

It seems possible for at least this relatively vocal and visibly involved group of parents to actively lobby for their children. One participant recalled how she had made use of her personal connections with school personnel in order to enable her son to make unusual schedule changes. Since data pertaining to "uninvolved" parents was not available, it is not possible to determine whether such incidents are confined to a small group of parents or not.

Supporting education at home: not all involved parents, one participant realized, are necessarily highly visible in the school building. Teachers/staff at Rural High seem conscious of the fact that parents may be "silently" involved in their children's education, supporting them at home, providing an environment conducive to learning and achievement.

> "I think the majority of the involvement comes from the ones that are behind the scenes that you don't see up here. . . . The majority are involved but they are not the ones that are coming up here to the PTO or PTA." (Staff Y1)

Changes Over Time

In this case more than in the other two cases studied, the theme of how parent involvement

had changed over time as the children grew older surfaced frequently. Teachers/staff members mentioned student age as one major factor as to why visible parental involvement in school is relatively low at the high school level.

> "From my experience I will tell you that the degree of parental involvement is directly related to the grade level of the students. I see much more parental involvement when I'm teaching kids, 8th and 9th graders. As the kids get older, less and less parental involvement. . . . There are a couple of reasons for that. One is the fact that as the kids get older, they want to be more independent. I think that the parents are less likely to get involved. . . . The parents, I think, are still concerned about what is going on, and yet the kids don't want them involved, and they are old enough where, I think, the parents are willing to give them an extra measure of freedom from parental involvement." (Teacher V2)

Parents confirmed the teachers' assessment. They mentioned that older students--as well as their teachers--do not need them as much any more.

> "It's a natural phenomena for parents, I think, when their kids are in kindergarten for them to be more involved, and that drops off as the child gets older and advances in school." (Parents E2)

> "[My presence has diminished because of the fact that] they have gotten older. . . . I don't know if the teachers were self-sufficient or what. . . . I don't feel that my actual presence was needed. They seemed to have it all together whereas at an elementary school they are always needing somebody to cut and paste and help with the little ones, and once they got a little older it seemed like they didn't need that. It was 4th grade, that is when [the child] went over to middle school and that is basically when I stopped as far as going into the classrooms. . . . I was not asked, so I guess that is basically why I did not volunteer." (Parent D2)

It should be noted enough, that all parents interviewed for this study were still in some form involved in their children's lives and education--oftentimes by being supportive at home. Mothers had just merely stopped being present in their children's classrooms. It would be accurate to say in the case of these parents that the type of their involvement changed, not that involvement disappeared altogether. In the case of one father, involvement had even increased because he had

gotten increasingly involved in his children's athletic activities. It is possible that the decrease of parent involvement as the child grows older is gender specific: mothers decrease their supportive presence in their children's classrooms. The question of how parental involvement changes over time--in terms of quantity and quality--is deserving of further research.

WHAT WORKS: ENABLERS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Although parental involvement at Rural High was generally perceived by this study's participants to be low, some parents are highly involved. The following factors were named by teachers/staff and parents as existing enablers to parental involvement at Rural High:

- energetic and enthusiastic individuals: some teachers who are in charge of extracurricular activities were described as being able to excite and attract both students and parents.
- teachers/staff members living in the communities served by Rural High: participants mentioned how valuable it is for school-parent relations if teachers and parents live in the same communities, and have opportunities to meet outside of the school building.
- old tradition and ties between the school and the community: many residents of the county served by Rural High are graduates of the school. Their ties with and interest in the school enhance school-community relations in general, and parental involvement in particular.
- events that organically involve parents: at the beginning of the 1994/95 school year Rural High School experimented with a new form of organizing back-to-school/orientation activities. Parents were invited to help organize and staff booths

where students signed up for clubs, received their books, got to know their teachers, etc.

- involving the school in community events: examples: band playing at the Christmas parade.
- teachers' and staff members' inviting and positive attitude toward parents: one teacher described how she encourages parental involvement by sending letters inviting parents' visits and contributions. It was also mentioned that parent-school relations improve if--even during crisis communication--teachers try to "find something nice to say about the kid. . . . I think parents appreciate that." (Teacher W8)
- official functions/events designed to draw parents into the school: examples are:
    - teacher's night (parent-teacher conferences): teachers stay after school until 8:00 p.m. as well as from 8:00 a.m. until noon the next day in order to give parents--regardless of their work shifts--a chance to meet with the teachers.
    - academic assemblies
- meetings (for instance PTO meetings) that involve students presenting or performing.
- frequent communication: example: interim reports sent halfway through the grading period.
- designing class projects involving the parents: example: one teacher described how she had assigned a 12-week project requiring students to plan a trip to a

foreign country. This type of project encouraged parent involvement as well as student-parent communication about matters related to school.

- involving parents in constructive disciplinary measures: one teacher described her success in disciplining students by requiring them to write a letter addressed to their parents and herself. Students have to discuss their misbehavior in these letters which are to be signed by their parents.

BARRIERS TO PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

The following factors were mentioned by participants as constituting barriers to parental involvement:

- parents working long hours/numerous jobs.
- parents attitude: one barrier to parental involvement was attributed to the parent attitude that "I have done what I can, they're 18, it's time for them to pick up their own responsibility. There is only so much I can do." (Teacher T1)

Both parents and teachers, furthermore, stated that high school students tend to discourage parental involvement because they feel embarrassed.

> "I don't think those kids want their parents involved in high school. It's a real bummer if your parents are involved. I note that they get some of that peer pressure. Like my son would say `don't speak to me if you see me in the office.'" (Parent E13)

According to the same parent, however, this "embarrassment" may well be a "front" put on for the students' peers:

> "They [the students] think it's embarrassing. They say they hate it but deep down I think they like us to be involved, but they won't tell us that. I think they get that sense of how important it is for us to be involved but, I think for their peers, like `oh my god, my

parents are here.' They put on a front, but I think deep down they want us involved." (Parent E5)

- lack of communication: frequently mentioned as a barrier to parent involvement was the lack of or insufficient communication. Parents described incidents where they were not at all informed or heard too late about PTO meetings and other events. It was mentioned that too much information was passed on through word of mouth, leaving parents out who are not part of a network. Another complaint focused on last-minute schedule changes of games and other events which makes it difficult for parents to adjust. It was frequently pointed out that one cannot rely on high school students to keep their parents informed.

One teacher, furthermore, admitted that lack of time forces him/her to reduce her number of phone calls to crisis-oriented calls. Communication, consequently, is mainly negative which does not encourage parental involvement.

- reluctance on the part of the school staff/personnel: one staff member pointed out that the school may not have been very inviting to parents due to fear of criticism. Likewise, one parent pointed out that teachers may not present to parents just how parents could be involved in their classrooms.

"Teachers don't present things, issues that they can use help within the classes, and then I guess a lot of the classes, especially when they get into high school, that there is not that much they can do. . . . Maybe if they presented this in a way to get the parents to be more involved with class activities." (Parent F9)

- lack of time and space to privately contact parents by phone;
- lacking school policy: it was remarked that it would be helpful to have clear guidelines as to what teachers ought to do regard to of parental involvement.

- several parents and teachers expressed the opinion that other parents refuse to get involved in school either because they do not assume responsibility for their children's education, they do not want to be involved, they do not care, or because they perceive it as "the school's job to educate children." These attitudes, however, are speculations and were not found among any of these study's participants.
- some teachers assumed that parents might feel intimated by the school. Data of this study neither confirms nor questions that possibility.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The community of Rural High educators and parents is invited to consider the following recommendations:

1. Diversify parent involvement at Rural High. More emphasis could be put on inviting parents to become involved in academic affairs rather than mainly extracurricular activities.

2. A regularly sent newsletter--including a continuously updated school calendar--would enhance communication with the parent community. In order to keep mailing costs down, a newsletter could be attached to grade and interim reports.

3. It is recommended for the school to use its existing strengths as a base for enhancing parental involvement. Rural High has a small, but strong, group of parents who are highly supportive of extracurricular activities. This parent group could serve as a link between the school and other parents.

4. Discussing and establishing general guidelines on parental involvement are

recommended. These guidelines should specify whether parental involvement should be a school priority, and if so, how it could be achieved.

5. The school could consider organizing events in addition to PTO meetings that attract parents. One parent, for instance, expressed interest in parent workshops.

6. Further improve communication with the community at large about special events occurring at the school or performed by school organizations (band, athletic teams, etc.)

7. Communicate that different forms of parental involvement are welcomed at Rural High. The range of activities in which parents could be involved at school is wide and can accommodate both mothers and fathers with different interests.

CROSS CASE ANALYSIS: CONCLUSION

After having analyzed the degree, nature, barriers and enablers of parental involvement at three distinctly different high schools in the metropolitan area, several conclusions can be drawn:

1. Parental involvement differs drastically in both degree and nature between different high schools in the metropolitan area. City High and Suburban High are, for instance, no more than 15 miles apart. Both are public high schools. And yet they serve extremely different populations: one mostly working class and poor as well as predominantly African-American; the other mostly middle-class and predominantly Caucasian. One finds different degrees of parental involvement as well as vastly different dynamics between the schools and the communities. It follows, then, that recommendations for the improvement of parental involvement in schools have to be context specific and concrete.

Research in all three high schools also shows that parental involvement differs not only between schools, but also within schools. Rural High school serves as a prime example. Just as the school is highly stratified--tracking its students into college preparatory as well as vocational classes--so are the parents. A small group of highly involved parents coexists with a large group of parents who are at least perceived to be uninvolved or little involved. Recommendations for the improvement of parental involvement thus have to take diversity into account, recognizing that the parent population is not monolithic at any school.

2. A high degree of parental involvement does not necessarily mean that the relationships between parents and educators are healthy, or generally perceived as productive. Suburban High serves as a good example of a school with a generally high degree of parental

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involvement, and yet both parents and teachers frequently described school-community relations as difficult or strained. Whereas Chavkin/Williams (1987) found that school administrators and parents may differ greatly in what they perceive to be appropriate parental involvement (for instance, parents included "shared decision making" in their definition of parental involvement, administrators did not), research at Suburban High shows that disagreements on what constitutes "good" parental involvement cannot only be found between administrators and parents, but also between teachers and parents, and perhaps even among parents and among teachers. An engaged and vocal parent body may be perceived by educators as invading their professional sphere. Educators complained about parents exerting excessive amounts of pressure on them as well as on the students. The parent community, on the other hand, is internally divided and finds itself struggling with educators over who is in control of the education of their children. What we see here is an example of how success is coupled with certain tradeoffs. Academically, Suburban High is an extremely successful school. The highly involved parent community undoubtedly constitutes one important factor in having made this success possible. On the other hand, academic success also generates high levels of expectations on everyone, and particularly on the student body. Educators and parents have not yet been able to find productive ways of dealing with the question of how to handle--and possibly reduce--the pressure that necessarily goes along with high expectations, a tension that raises questions about how to mediate power and control, and how to find satisfying ways to negotiate teachers' needs to protect a recognized professional sphere with parents' interests in school affairs.

3. While most barriers to parental involvement mentioned by the literature were indeed found at the schools represented in this study (cultural, communication, resource,

institutional, leadership barriers) another highly powerful barrier has to be added to this list: a deeply felt chasm between the school and the parent community. Most apparent in the case of City High, some parents seem to have given up hope that their school--and urban public schools of a similar type--can or will indeed provide their children with the education they need in order to be socially and economically successful. More research needs to be done regarding this theme. Just as research has shown that students' perceptions/ assumptions concerning the value of education as a means of upward mobility are important determinants of students' academic motivation and performance (Ogbu, 1990) this study suggests that the same is true for parents.

Research for this study suggests that most parents would make serious attempts to overcome barriers--resource, communication, etc.--if they only believed that it was worth their efforts. Parents of City High students who are involved despite the existence of resource and communication barriers, for instance, point to the validity of this point. Likewise, the existence of deeply felt disillusionment and frustration on the part of parents who not only seem ready and capable of overcoming all sorts of barriers, but whose children are actually successful students, suggests that school-community relations at City High are plagued by deeper troubles than anything that could be overcome by mere short-term measures. On the contrary, this study reveals that we are faced with a much deeper--indeed structural--crisis concerning parent-school relations. Perhaps above all, parents' accounts indicate a crisis of legitimacy: schools are no longer perceived as potential harbingers of a brighter future.

4. The Findings 2 and 3, of course, are related. What Suburban High and City High school have in common, it seems, is that the decisive factor in shaping parental involvement is whether or not the community feels a sense of ownership over its own school. If parents possess

such a sense of ownership--as in the case of Suburban High--they tend to make use of it; they become more highly involved and they try to get the school to do what they want it to do. Since few--if any--communities are completely homogenous, a high level of involvement can also easily lead to a variety of frictions and tensions--among parents as well as between parents and educators. In the case of City High, on the other hand, feelings of ownership are lacking altogether. Here the problem is not so much the kind of parental involvement, or the consequences of a particular kind of parental involvement--as in the case of Suburban High--than the fact that parental involvement is basically non-existent.

But what, then, possibly helps generate--or alternatively stifles--a sense of ownership among parents? How and why do some parents manage to "make schools their own" and to become effective advocates, which included exerting pressure on the school to provide their children with the best possible education, while others do not? One explanation that can be derived from this study concerns the degree to which parents perceive their school to be a viable path toward economic stability and upward mobility. If they do--as is the case at Suburban High--parents become highly involved in school. If they do not--as seems predominantly the case at City High--parents generally refrain from active (or at least visible) school involvement.

5. Another barrier to parental involvement that does not receive much attention in the literature concerns the fragmentation of the parent community. As the case of Suburban High illustrates, a fragmented, transient, and anonymous community undercuts identification, and especially positive identification, with their school, and consequently restricts quality of parental involvement.

6. Recommendations for the improvement of parental involvement have to be both

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short-term and long-term. Certain effective measures can be devised and implemented relatively easily and do not need to generate insurmountable organizational problems or financial burdens. Other measures, on the other hand, need to be carefully planned and take financial resources, time, and fundamental restructuring in order to be successful.

Appendix A

Interview Guide Parents

1. How do you feel about x school?
   - how is that different from the school (s) that your child has attended before?
2. You live with your child. In what ways does what happens with your child at school influence what's going on around the house?
   - and how do you respond to that?
   - and what do you do?
   - has that changed over time?
3. What role do you play in your child's education?
   - Do you ever talk about school around the house? If no, how come? If yes, how do these discussions usually come up? What do you talk about? How has that changed over time?
4. Do you think it is necessary ever to go to your child's school?
   - If no: how come? Are you involved with any activities at the school?
   - If yes: How come? What do you? What are the activities of the school you are involved with?
   - Has that changed over time?

5. In a perfect world, what do you think parents should do to support their children's education? (Well, what about you?)

   - Should that be the same no matter what grade the child is in?

6. How close is your experience to this perfect world?

   - What are the differences? How come? How has that changed over time?

7. What would make it easier for you to be involved in school?

   - has that changed over time? If so, in what ways?

8. What things are being done in school to make it easier for you to get involved in school?

   - teachers?
   - administrators?
   - other organizations/programs?
   - how does all that compare to other grade levels?

9. Do you think that you are typical of parents in the school?

   - How so?

Interview Guide (Teachers)

1. Please describe the nature of parental involvement at this school.
   - ♦ how many parents are involved?
   - ♦ what kind of involvement?
   - ♦ in what areas are they not involved?
   - ♦ what kind of parents?
   - ♦ how come certain parents are not involved at all?
   - ♦ how come it is this way?
   - ♦ what kinds of parents are not involved?
2. What does the school do to encourage parental involvement?
   - ♦ do you do anything in your class that encourages parental involvement?
   - ♦ other teachers?
   - ♦ administrators?
   - ♦ policies?
   - ♦ structure?
3. What barriers to parental involvement do you see?
4. What would have to happen to improve the situation?
5. Do you think this school is different from other schools in regard to parental involvement?
   - ♦ if so: how come?
6. Has parental involvement changed over time?

Appendix B

Responses to survey question 4 by teachers/staff members at Suburban High:

- Positive statements included the citing of parents' affluence, their high level of education, high expectations, achievement orientation, high value placed on education, interests in college and career, desire for community involvement, the predominance of 2 - parent families, parents' high level of advocacy for children, interest of parents in children "having the best," their pride in school, encouragement of parent involvement by the school's administration, active PTA board, academic life being important to the community, and upward mobility orientation in the community.
- The comments of negative nature implied that parents want to control the school/teachers for the advantage of their children, that parents are very competitive and only get involved if the child is in academic jeopardy.

Appendix C

Responses to survey question 4 by teachers/staff members at City High:

1. family marital status, apathy, parental educational background, culturally deprived families, working;
2. those few parents who are involved have had a very positive influence; I do feel and hope that more parents will become involved;
3. students are older, parents often work;
4. transportation, not interested, communication;
5. many students don't communicate with their parents about school, some don't want to be involved;
6. we get quality involvement but not quantity involvement;
7. most of my students do not have a strong traditional family structure, many of the students are self-disciplined;
8. parents absorbed by work and other social problems, generally single-parent households;
9. parents seem to feel isolated from the school, many parents are drop-outs, have negative feelings about the educational system, also, many students are single parents and don't see the importance or relevance of education in their lives;
10. only time concern is shown is when the child is suspended;
11. breakdown of the family and family values;
12. distance that some parents have to travel, lack of interest;

Appendix C (continued)

13. lack of willingness on the part of parents to make a commitment to their child's education;

14. poor parenting skills;

15. several children in the family (usually younger than City High child), lack of mobility of parent;

16. diversity of students (City High is the only school in the city that has the "non-magnet" students come from three different areas and all the areas are high-crime areas, emphasis "non-magnet"

20. parents are not convinced they have a vital role;

21. many of the parents feel inadequate in getting involved with their students' education, they may be poorly educated themselves and fear being presented with questions they cannot answer. Poor family relations may also play a large part;

22. parent working different shifts;

23. many parents appear to feel that once students reach high school age they no longer require parental presence or parental support in their educational experience.

24. though parents do attend events they often seem to feel intimidated by school personnel or they may even be hostile and defensive;

25. there is no real effort to get parents involved;

26. parents are indifferent, education is not seen to be of importance to many parents, parents are unwilling to accept responsibility for their child/children's unwillingness to accept our teaching or the behavioral problems we encounter daily;

27. I honestly don't know.

Appendix D

Responses to survey question 4 at Rural High School: "Why do you think parental involvement is like this at your school?"

- parental involvement is limited to special projects;
- some parents fight hard for their children, others often give up after years of facing the special problems of their children; those parents who are involved are very interested in education of their children;
- parents of unsuccessful students have given up and feel there is nothing they can do;
- parents of special ed children show little involvement - perhaps because of frequent IEP meetings;
- the involved parents are parents of students who are involved in extracurricular activities;
- poor community;
- lack of info given to parents about activities;
- time constraints (many parents commute to the city and do not have time to visit the school)
- parents who are involved are either strong, straight traditional middle-class who support education and teachers or people who are pushing their children and looking out for them;
- parents work, are busy, don't care, teachers don't have time to contact them, ask them for assistance, some schools don't welcome parents;
- students are beyond elementary/middle school level;
- responsibility passed on to teachers, work of both parents seems to be an excuse;
- negative attitudes of parents toward the school, parents being afraid of being bullied or hearing negative things about their children;

Appendix D

- limited time of working parents, parents lack control (or responsibility) for problem students, parents feel that the school is responsible for solving all concerns/problems;
- "don't know what the hell to do,";
- parents not invited;
- most of the parents I see are the parents of good students;
- single parenthood, "don't call me unless there is a problem attitude;"
- parents are not quite sure how to get involved;
- rampant apathy, poor communication-students don't take info home, travel distance, need of a newsletter;
- parent indifference

Appendix E

VOLUNTARY CONSENT FORM

Parent Involvement in Public Education: Selected Case Studies

Introduction:
The project in which you will be participating is designed to help understand parent involvement in public schools. To reach this understanding, we will be talking with parents, principals, and teachers. You have been selected to participate in one of these conversations.

Benefits:
By analyzing these conversations, we will attempt to develop strategies for schools to use in making parent participation easier and more effective, generally. We are hopeful that this study will be of benefit to all schools and parents in the metropolitan [redacted] area.

Inconvenience:
We will make every effort to reduce the inconvenience that the study may cause you. Interviews will be held at your convenience and at a location that is convenient and comfortable for you.

Confidentiality:
All records of our conversation will be kept totally confidential. No one other than the two researchers listed below will have access to them. Although specific passages from the interviews may be used in reporting the results of the study, no statements will be attributed to any individuals by name without their written permission.

Withdrawal:
Participation in this study is voluntary. We will answer any questions about the study at any time. You may also end the interview any time you choose. You may also withdraw your consent for us to use these interviews at any time and they will not be used in this study.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call:
Maike Philipsen: 828-1332
Clifford Fox: 828-0478

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Committee on the Conduct of Human Research at (828-0868) for information or assistance.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

You will receive a copy of this consent form.

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